

AUTHOR:
DOUFU MAYOI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DaiXt
KUROGIN (DIGS)

8



BLACK SUMMONER

THE POPE OF THE HOLY EMPIRE



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KELVIN

COLETTE

MELFINA

"HAA, HAA, HAA...
A ROOM FILLED WITH
MEL-SAMA'S AND
KELVIN-SAMA'S SUBLIME
FRAGRANCES... I CAN SMELL
IT FRESH AND CLEAR EVEN
THROUGH THE KEYHOLE. GHHHH,
THE SWEET AND SUBLIME AROMA
COURSES THROUGH MY BODY
FROM HEAD TO TOE! AHH, I'VE
HELD MYSELF BACK FOR SO LONG,
MY INHIBITORS ARE ON THE
VERGE OF BREAKING DOWN. I'VE
ALREADY SENT EVERYONE AWAY,
SO I CAN INDULGE MYSELF JUST
A LITTLE BIT, RIGHT? JUST A
TINY BIT! I CAN ALLOW MYSELF
TO PARTAKE OF THIS HOLY
FRAGRANCE FOR THE
BRIEFEST OF MOMENTS—"

CURRENT HERO PARTY VS. RION

JUST WHAT WOULD BE THE OUTCOME OF THIS FURIOUS BATTLE
OF WILDLY FLYING SPELLS AND CLASHING SWORDS?!

KUROMIYA
MIYABI

RION

KANZAKI
TOUYA

SHIGA
SETSUNA

MIZUOKA
NANA



BLACK SUMMONER

Characters



Kelvin Celsius

Summoner who gained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life while transmigrating from Japan. Constantly seeking battle with powerful foes.

Alias: Grim Reaper

Kelvin's Companions



Efri

A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Rion

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Melfina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Ellie

A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.



Ruka

An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Quite good at fighting.



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



Alex

Kelvin's huge shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.



Shutola Trycen

Trycen's princess. Currently freeloading at Kelvin's place. Every day is a blast!

Parth, the City of Peace

A city located right in between the four great powers of the Eastern Continent. Founded as a symbol of hope for long-lasting peace.

Rio

Guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer's Guild.

Quite the schemer. Alias: "Analyzer."

Toraj, the Country of Water

Faces the Sea of Dragons. Has very advanced shipbuilding and agricultural industries. Rooted in Japanese culture with staples like rice and tatami.



Tsubaki Fujiwara

Queen of Toraj. Has taken a liking

to Kelvin and his companions.

Constantly tries to solicit their services.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette

Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya

A Hero summoned from Japan.

Lucky pervert. Dual wields.

Heading for the Western Continent.



Shiga Setsuna

A Hero summoned from Japan.

Serious and diligent. Cleans up

the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana

A Hero summoned from Japan.

Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame

dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi

A Hero summoned from Japan.

One quarter Russian. Her

thoughts are a complete mystery.

Gaun, the Country of Beastkin

The home of the beastkin, who possess superior physical prowess. Its people believe that strength is everything. Crowns the strongest person in the country as king.

Leonhart Gaun

The Beast King of Gaun. Served as proctor for Kelvin's Rank S promotion exam.

Kilto Gaun

The Beast King's third son. A doting brother who thinks Goma, his little sister, is the cutest thing in the world.

Sabato

The Beast King's fourth son. Can't beat Goma in physical or verbal fights.

Goma

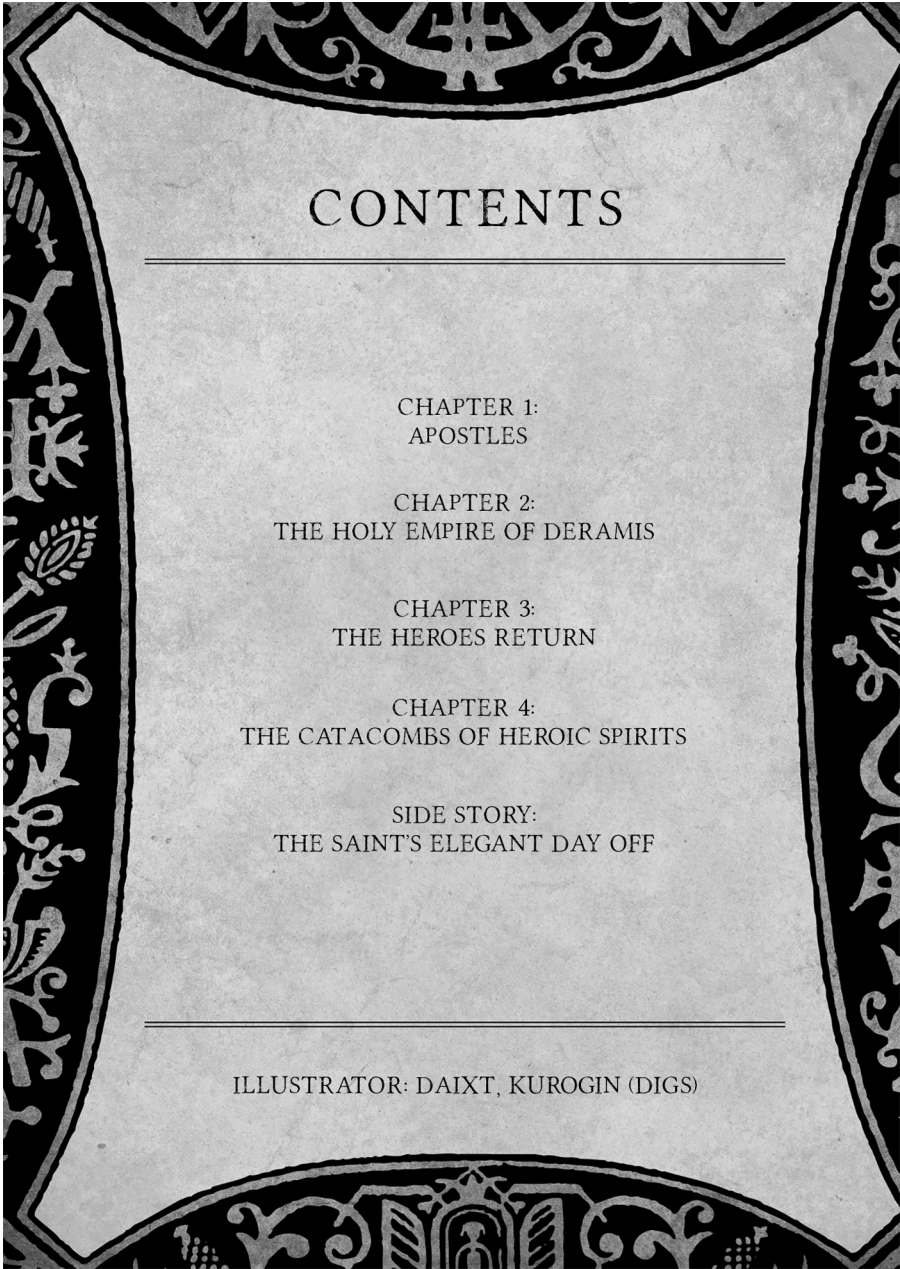
The Beast King's only daughter. Princess of Gaun. Always beats Sabato up.

The Military Kingdom of Trycen

A militaristic country that touts human supremacy. Rumored to be kidnapping the citizens of other countries as slaves and up to similarly suspicious endeavors.

Azgrad Trycen

Crown Prince of Trycen and general of the Dragon Knight Order. Incredibly proficient dragon rider.



CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:
APOSTLES

CHAPTER 2:
THE HOLY EMPIRE OF DERAMIS

CHAPTER 3:
THE HEROES RETURN

CHAPTER 4:
THE CATACOMBS OF HEROIC SPIRITS

SIDE STORY:
THE SAINT'S ELEGANT DAY OFF

ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Apostles

“Guildmaster Rio— No, Riold is an Apostle. The alias that Our Lady bestowed upon him was Analyzer, and he is the Fifth Seat. He and I were in charge of gathering and manipulating information.”

The truth that Ange revealed shocked us...or not really. At least, for me it was more like, “Ah, as I’d thought.” Efil did look extremely shocked, though.

“Huh? You knew, Kelvin?”

“More like I’d considered the possibility when I found out you were Assassin. I was planning on taking time to go over everything I knew tomorrow or the day after. Now I have the confirmation I need. Thank you for telling us, Ange.”

“I see... Ehe heh, so I was of help to you?” The red in Ange’s cheeks from the alcohol deepened by a shade.

“How did you figure out he was working for Elearis, Master?” Efil asked.

“I wasn’t sure if he was a proper Apostle like Ange was, but I suspected he was connected in some way. You know how it seems like you can never tell what he’s thinking? It’s *that* Rio— Ah, his actual name is Riold? We’re talking about that cunning old coot. Even if he was innocent, there’s no way he wouldn’t notice what Ange was up to. Not when she was working under him. I may not trust him, but I have every faith in his uncannily sharp eye.”

“As always, you truly see through all, Master.”

Ange sighed. “As an intelligence operative, I have no idea how I’m supposed to feel about this.”

I mean, I did always have my guard up against that sly old man, but the idea of him being an Apostle wouldn’t have occurred to me if I didn’t know you were one, Ange.

“Long ago, when I was only a Rank A adventurer, I tried peeking at Riold’s Status using Analyze Eye. I suppose this means both of you were using a skill named Disguise all along?”

“That is correct. For me, it was obvious why I had to do it; it’d be weird for a supposedly normal guild receptionist to have her Status Concealed, right? As for the Guildmaster, he changed his Status using Disguise, *then* cast Rank B Concealment on top of everything. That way, although you might have had your guard up against him, you didn’t suspect anything further, right?”

“That’s...fair enough.” *I suppose hearing that he used to party up with Mist-san, the Guildmaster over at the capital in Toraj, also reassured me a little. Wait, hold on...*

“Is the Guildmaster over at the branch in the capital of Toraj, Mist-san, also one of your former buddies?”

“Nope, Guildmaster Mist isn’t connected in any way. It is true that she and Riold partied up when they were younger, but I’m afraid I don’t know anything about what his life was like before he became an Apostle.”

“I see...” *Tch.*

“Uh, did you just click your tongue? You did, didn’t you?”

“The possibility of there being someone so strong among my acquaintances got my hopes up a little.”

“Normal people would be relieved in this situation, Kelvin-kun.”

What can I do? This is just the way I am. “Speaking of which, that Disguise skill sounds pretty darn useful. I didn’t see it when I was looking for skills similar to Concealment. Are there certain conditions for picking it up?”

“There is one. When you get Rank S Concealment, it’s secretly added to the list of skills you can acquire.”

“Secretly, huh?” *In other words, I was supposed to notice the addition within that massive list when I didn’t even know it’d happen? That’s a bit of a tall order, isn’t it? Couldn’t I have gotten a message like, “You have now unlocked such and such skill”? But my complaint aside, this doesn’t change the fact that Disguise sounds very useful. Let’s grab it now.*

Disguise (Rank F) [SP Cost: 10]

The ability to change the age displayed on your Status.

Uh, my age?

Noticing my look, Ange explained, “When the skill rank is low, there isn’t much you can do with it. When you raise it to Rank S, though, it’ll let you change everything.”

“I-I see...”

I suppose this could be useful to some women even at Rank F, but I can’t really see myself— Hold on. My life span is now much longer due to me Evolving into a daemon. If I look at this long-term, it could still be useful as is, I guess.

“So, where’s Guildm— Where’s Riold-san now?” Efil asked. “We haven’t actually seen him in quite a while.”

I started. “Now that you mention it...” *The last time we saw him was, what, after we killed Demon Lord Zel? Ange told us he was traveling around mediating postwar arrangements.*

“Well, now that he probably knows I’ve joined you guys, I don’t think he’s ever coming back to the Parth Adventurer’s Guild. Since his

cover's been blown, there's no need for him to risk it."

"Does that mean we don't have to worry about him suddenly coming to attack us through the teleportation gate?"

"I can't say for sure, but the possibility is very low. Riold's on the Western Continent at the moment, after all."

"Wow, that's pretty far."

However, he was the gatekeeper for the teleportation gate in Parth. It'd be dangerous to leave him with the authority to use it, but how can I explain it to whoever's in power? It'd probably be a whole thing trying to explain about Melfina and Elearis, and if I did it badly, I might be the one who comes across as suspicious. If only there was someone who conveniently has a certain understanding of the circumstances and the authority to decide who gets to use the gates—

"Ah."

"Master?"

"Kelvin?"

There is someone. Looks like our next destination's been decided.

I shook my head. "It's nothing. There's no change to our plans to return through the gate. If Riold really does attack us when we do so, we'll take it as a bonus. We'll be with our entire party and we'll be ready. If needed, King Leonhart will probably even vouch for us. The only concern is the Apostles deciding they're willing to do whatever it takes and, say, attack the entire city of Parth."

"The possibility of that happening is almost zero. Arbitrator's goal is to help Elearis descend upon this world as a goddess, not commit indiscriminate mass slaughter. Remember how I first evacuated everyone in the vicinity when I called you out?"

"You did. But what about with the Demon Lord, then? The Apostles were involved with his appearance, right?"

"We did use the Demon Lord and a Black Grimoire to gather mana, but that was more like taking advantage of a naturally occurring phenomenon. I know this kind of sounds like an excuse after the fact, but Protector was going to kill the Demon Lord after letting it rampage for a while. After all, the Heroes of this age are far too weak to do it. But in the end, you ended up taking care of everything."

Ange had a very conflicted look on her face due to her complicated standing in regards to everything that had happened.

Wait, she just casually revealed that there's at least one Apostle who fits the condition for negating Mara Pisuna! In other words, that Apostle's gotta be a Hero! WHOO!

"Wh-What was that, M-Master?!"

"Why'd you suddenly shout out loud?!"

"Ah, sorry, Efil, Ange. I couldn't hold myself back any longer."

Understanding dawned on Ange's face. "Ahh, so that's what it

was.”

“Master, I’ll pour you some herbal tea,” Efil said, getting up. “It’ll help you calm down.”

“Thank you for understanding, both of you.”

If I have to give an analogy, it’s like making Melfina sit at a table loaded with dishes made by Efil. Oh no, I’m drooling... Let’s take a sip of the tea that Efil just poured me. Okay, be calm. Be calm. I’m normal. I’m absolutely normal. Inhale, exhale. Inhale...exhale... Okay, I’m good now. Still, this conversation really is bad for my heart.

“Ange, we kinda got cut off before, but can you tell us all you know about the Apostles now?”

“Oh, right. I don’t mind, but wouldn’t it be better to gather everyone for this?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll upload all the info to the Network. But tell me the details slowly. The night’s still young; we have plenty of time.”

“That’s a pretty troublesome chronic condition you have there, Kelvin.”

At least I’m not as bad as Colette. Uh...I’m not, right?



“Nn...hnn...”

I slowly woke up with my left arm feeling strange. My consciousness struggled to push through a fog of languor and listlessness.

Last night...I listened to Ange...then got caught up in a drinking showdown between Gerard and Nellas. I swear both of them have bottomless stomachs; no one in their right mind should challenge them, and that includes me. After a while, Efil and I excused ourselves and got away. I wonder if those two continued their match after that?

“In any case, it’s about time I got— Huh?”

Just as I was about to sit up in bed, an incredible force pulled on my left arm.

“Mmm... Why’re you going away...”

“Uh...because it’s morning?”

The culprit was Sera. She was sound asleep, probably because there was still alcohol in her system. Clearly, she wasn’t going to get up anytime soon. And just as clearly, she wasn’t going to let go of my arm. Although she normally slept quite peacefully, things were a bit different when she went to bed drunk. That said, she was no match for Melfina, of course!

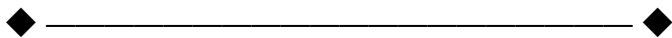
“Efil is already awake. Of course she is.”

There was still a bit of warmth left on the right side of the bed where Efil had slept, but it was already vacant. At this time, she was most likely making breakfast.

Hmm, what should I do? Sera isn't letting go of my arm.

"Oh, right."

I might as well use this time to properly review all the info uploaded to the Network. My notes on everything Ange shared about the lineup and abilities of the Apostles last night should be up there. Right, here it is. If I organize it a bit... All right, this sums it up nicely.



Tenth Seat: Empty

This Seat was empty when Ange was still in the organization. Based on her conjecture, Tristan Faaze has been reincarnated to assume this position. When he was still alive, he possessed Summoning and used a golem made by Jildora.

Ninth Seat: Survivor

Real name: unknown. The swordsman Rion fought at the Beast King Festival. The second newest addition to the organization if Tristan did join. Managed to stall Rion, Gerard, and Alex all by himself when I was attacked by Ange and Baal. Body has seemingly inexhaustible powers of immortality; he recovers in an instant even when beheaded, immolated, or reduced to cinders. Unknown whether this is due to a Unique Skill. Possesses a large variety of other abilities, including instant-draw iaijutsu.

Eighth Seat: Assassin

Hardly a reveal anymore, but this used to be Ange's seat. Possesses two Unique Skills: Uncontainable, which enables her to pass through both matter and magic, and Assassin's Strike, which multiplies the damage done when catching an opponent by surprise. According to her, Ange's Agility is the highest among all the Apostles. However, when fighting head-on, her battle strength is below average. Due to her leaving the organization and joining our side, this seat should now be empty.

Seventh Seat: Reviver

Real name: Estoria Kranweltz. A voluptuous vampire with as good a figure as Sera's (racially, demons and vampires are separate). Ange did not have much opportunity to interact with her, but she knows her name because she often mentions it. Supposedly possesses the power to resurrect the dead, something that even Rank S White Magic cannot achieve, but Ange never saw Reviver use this power in person. Is on extremely bad terms with Condemner of the Sixth Seat.

Sixth Seat: Condemner

Real name: Bel Baal. As is obvious from her family name—though Ange can't say for sure, as Baal never talked about her past—chances are high she's a demon tied to Sera through familial relations. Still, Baal was the one Ange was closest with. Ange passionately told me how, despite having a sharp tongue, Baal was actually a really good listener. Possesses the Unique Skill Color Corrosion, which enables her to freely increase or decrease the intensity of a target's properties. Specializes in close-quarters combat using kicks and Green Magic. Is on extremely bad terms with Reviver of the Seventh Seat.

Fifth Seat: Analyzer

Introduced himself as "Rio" when I first met him, but his real name is Riold. Served as Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild branch in Parth, where he and Ange monitored me and my party. Possesses a grand-sounding Unique Skill called God's Eye, which enables him to easily see through skills such as Concealment and Disguise. Likely a significantly superior version of Analyze Eye. Currently on the Western Continent.

Fourth Seat: Protector

Real name: Serge Flore. Summoned as a Hero by a former Oracle of Deramis, Iris Deramilius, to defeat Demon Lord Gustav. Has a very open and cheerful personality but possesses battle prowess leaps and bounds beyond that of the other Apostles. Mainly stays within the organization's base to protect the temple within and rarely leaves. Due to this, she's often bored and engages Ange in meaningless chitchat whenever the opportunity arises. However, a lot of confidential information gets mentioned during those supposedly meaningless chats, making this one of the venues through which Ange acquired her knowledge. Possesses Absolute Gospel as a Unique Skill, which grants her such good luck that circumstances are bent to her benefit. Judging by the fact that it has the same name, this is likely the same skill as Touya's, meaning she has the same protagonist characteristics he has. Her black hair and eyes indicate she is most likely a Japanese person like me and the current Heroes.

Third Seat: Creator

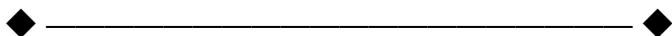
Real name: Jildora. Has lived for a long, long time thanks to his Unique Skill, Eternal Return, which enables him to jump into other bodies. Has spent that time mostly involved in research in a large variety of fields, ranging from creating golems, weapons, and items to studying biology and virology. Just like Ange, the majority of Apostles wield weapons made by him. Has deep personal history with Gerard.

Second Seat: Selector

Real name: unknown. The one Apostle Ange has never met in person. She's only ever heard their—Ange couldn't determine the person's gender—voice through a Holy Stele. Supposedly only Arbitrator knows their location. All that she knows is that they are in charge of selecting new talent for the organization. In short, they serve as a scout for the organization.

First Seat: Arbitrator

Real name: Iris Deramilius. One of Colette's ancestors. The Oracle of Deramis from the era when Demon Lord Gustav threatened the world. She received an incomplete form of Reincarnate, the power to reincarnate souls, from Elearis, the target of her worship. Has been using that power to bring back talents useful to the organization. Almost always found praying at the temple in the base. Possibly as an effect of receiving the power of a goddess, her skills are completely different from when she was alive and she is now half a deity (according to Protector).



I guess that's about it? I'll ask Ange to look it over later. Of course, one thing we have to keep in mind is that this is only info Ange knew. In other words, each Apostle could still have aces up their sleeves, be it more Unique Skills or anything else, just like Ange never told anyone else about Assassin's Strike.

“Just thinking about this is getting me excited.”

I'm positively tingling with excitement; such is my lot as a Japanese guy. We're a battle-hardened race! Oh no! My heart is racing so fast I'm feeling a nosebleed coming on!

“Uh...”

“Oh, hey, you're up, Sera?”

When I looked around in search of something to plug up my nose, I noticed that Sera had woken up. For some reason, she was staring at me with judgmental eyes.

“Perv.”

“Wait, no! This isn't *that* kind of nosebleed!”



After clearing up Sera's misunderstanding and finishing the breakfast Efil made, I headed to the open square in the middle of the Village of Elves.

“This is a sight indeed. All the food and drinks are just gone.”

How late did the elves stay up? Not a single morsel was left from all

the dishes that had been prepared, and empty bottles rolled about on the wooden tables.

“The elves themselves appear to be completely out too,” Efil replied before turning to Nellas. “Pardon my forwardness, but I’ve made enough congee for everyone.”

I chuckled. “What luck we had so much rice in Clotho’s Storage.”

When we walked through the village, we saw elves lying around everywhere, most with bottles in their hands, almost all lying limp. They must have drunk themselves into oblivion. A few from our party who had finished breakfast earlier—including Rion, Shutola, and the maids—were now passing out warm tea and tending to them. Of course, I had sent Sera indoors ahead of time so that she wouldn’t breathe in the fumes from the elves’ breaths.

“I can still...keep going...*roar*...”

I cast a glance to the side. “Is that corpse over there our dear friend Dahak?”

“I heard he challenged Gerard-san to what he called a ‘duel between men,’” Efil answered.

“Oof, it clearly didn’t go well for him. C’mon, man, you should have known better.” *It’s like challenging Melfina or Sylvia to an eating contest.*

Leaving Dahak alone, I turned my eyes to the seats next to his. There, two figures were still sitting conspicuously upright amid the sea of casualties.

“Uh, don’t tell me... They’ve been at it all night?”

“Unfortunately, I believe so.”

Even Efil could not help but sigh. So did I. How could I not, seeing what they were like?

“*Glug, glug...phew!* You sure can hold your drink, Elder Nellas! You’re the first person I’ve met who’s been able to keep pace with me this far!”

“I may not look it, but I took second place in the Western Continent Drinking Competition! I can’t very well lose to you just yet, Gerard-dono!”

“Gah ha ha! What a merry time we’re having!”

“To great friends!”

“CHEERS!”

“CHEERS!”

CLANK!

The sound of mugs knocking together in a toast rang out god knows how many times.

You sure seem intent on destroying my image of a leader of elves, Nellas-san. And here I was, feeling so touched when we last parted. Well, this is no time to be complaining. If I leave these two alone, they’re likely to

continue drinking until the end of time.

“Gerard-san, Nellas-sama, it’s already morning. It’s about time to wrap up this drinking session.”

Ah, Efil got to it before me.

“Mm?” Gerard looked up. “Now that you mention it, it seems strangely bright.”

“Is that so?” Nellas brought a hand up to his brow as he shook his head. “It’s been so long since our village had a celebration that it seems we went a bit overboard. I think I’m also quite drunk. Now it looks to me like Efil-san’s ears are longer than they used to be.”

“My...ears?” Efil’s ears twitched cutely a few times.

Oh, right, we haven’t told the Elder about Efil’s Evolution yet.

“You’re not imagining it,” I said. “After our battle with the Demon Lord, Efil Evolved into a high elf.”

“Huh?” Nellas blinked at me blankly.

Efil smiled like an angel. “Oh, that’s right. My ears grew during the Evolution. Now they’re as long as everyone else’s in this village.”

For some reason, Nellas froze. His jaw dropped in the most perfect sense of the word I’d ever seen. Even Gerard, who had been on the same wavelength with him until that point, tilted his head in confusion.

I peered into his face. “Um, Nellas-sa—”

“E-E-E...”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“EVERYONEEEEE! WAKE UUUUUP! A HIGH ELF! A HIGH ELF FROM THE LEGENDS HAS BEEN BOOOOORN!”

A shout far too loud for the morning reverberated throughout the village. All effects of alcohol had disappeared from the Elder in a split second.



“I am truly sorry for losing myself,” Nellas apologized, sitting up straight to show how earnest he was. “I got a bit too excited.”

The elves gathered in the square waved away the Elder’s apology in a chorus of murmurs. Thanks to Efil’s congee, they, too, had made a full recovery from their hangovers. To those wondering how they had recovered with a simple bowl of rice gruel, all I can say is: because it was made by Efil. That’s the long and short of it.

“Judging from your reaction just now, high elves are quite highly esteemed in your culture?” I asked.

“‘Esteemed’ doesn’t cover it!” Nellas exclaimed. “We elves live long lives, but only a handful have ever obtained the honor. To my knowledge, it was centuries ago that it last happened, and that high elf went on to achieve the incredible feat of defeating a Demon Lord

as a member of the Hero Serge's party!"

Seeing that Nellas's breathing was growing increasingly ragged and excited, I interrupted him. "Okay, okay, please calm down! You're raising your blood pressure!" *Please take a few deep breaths first before continuing.*

"My blood...pressure? Can't say that's something I've been aware of before."

"It's a thing, trust me. And I think I sort of get what you're saying. If Rion goes to Deramis, they'll probably react the same way to her." *Since she's a saint and all.*

To sum up what the Elder told us after calming down, high elves were truly rare beings. All elves who Evolved into one accomplished historic feats and lived very colorful lives.

The elves crowded around Efil, well-wishes on their lips. Some even started to worship her.

"U-Um, may I shake your hand please, Efil-san?"

"Congratulations, Efil-chan! Now your future is guaranteed!"

"Dear, Efil-chan already defeated a Demon Lord; her life is smooth sailing now. Looks like she's found a good partner too. Right, Efil-chan?"

Efil nodded. "I'm very happy with my life now."

"We can't very well let you return without doing anything for you!" Nellas declared. "This calls for another fea—"

"That's enough, Nellas-san." *Don't use this as an excuse to raise another toast.*



Once we finished saying our farewells to the villagers, we headed back to the capital of Gaun. Dahak had recovered enough to fly, so we made good time.

"For some reason, the majority of my memories of the Village of Elves involve feasting," I commented wryly.

"That's fine, isn't it?" Gerard chortled. "The villagers all seemed happy and I fully enjoyed myself!"

Dahak grumbled, "How am I supposed to ever win?" before releasing a short blast of fire from his mouth in a sigh.

You realize the person you challenged was still going strong the next morning, right? Have you considered choosing a different thing to challenge him with? Like gardening, for example?

Shutola looked at Gerard. "Grandpa, I don't drink."

"I'm not that great with alcohol either." Rion smiled wryly.

"Efil," Gerard said, "I am swearing off alcohol as of today. Don't bother preparing wine for me tonight."

"Understood."

Quick and decisive, just as a man should be. Gerard didn't hesitate for even a second.

"We're finally returning to Parth tomorrow..." Melfina murmured wistfully. "Fun times really do pass in the blink of an eye."

Honestly, I feel like Melfina enjoyed herself even more than the kids.

"That is so," Efil agreed before turning to the other maids. "Rest up properly today. When we return, we will be thoroughly cleaning the mansion, going through the spaces and corners the golems missed."

Ellie and Rosalia chorused, "Yes, Efil-sama."

At the same time, Ruka said, "Okaaay," raising her hand half-heartedly and sighing. "Aw, we have to get back to work tomorrow."

"I want to skip it," Huba mumbled under her breath.

I understand where they're coming from. It's the same feeling as going back to work after an extended holiday, right? Our house is huge, so I imagine it takes a lot of work to manage. At least now we've got Dahak to take care of the garden. To think Efil used to do everything all by herself.. The working conditions should be much better now, so hang in there, you two.

Everyone was free to spend our last day in Gaun however they wanted. We would be returning by teleportation gate the next day, so I got to work making the necessary preparations.



Today was the day of our return. We were using the teleportation gate within the Castle of the Divine Spirit Tree. More precisely, we were already standing in front of the gate. All I had to do was present my guild card for confirmation and pour mana into the device.

"U-Um, are you sure we don't need to provide mana, Kelvin-sama?"

"Mel and I have got it, don't worry. Especially because we need to keep it open for quite a while. It'll be tiring, right?"

"It's true that we can only maintain it for a short period of time, but..."

The old man representing the court mages normally tasked with the operation of the gate shot Jereol and Yujil a look. The pair simply nodded with a resigned air. *Just let them do as they please*, basically.

As I'd had to submit an official application to use the gate, our schedule was readily available to everyone in an important position in Gaun. The princess and all the princes of Gaun—with the exception of Kילו—were currently there with us, making it a truly extravagant send-off. For some reason, they all had bewildered looks on their faces. The Beast King had other business and therefore couldn't make it.

“Thanks for everything, Sabato,” I said, giving the beastkin a clap on the shoulder. “Come visit us in Parth every once in a while, yeah?”

“S-Sure...”

I turned to Goma. “I bet King Leonhart’s giving you a hard time as always, but never stop fighting back. Speaking of, send him my regards please.”

“R-Right, I will...”

“It’s such a pity I couldn’t see Prince Kilto one last t—”

Unable to hold it in any longer, both Sabato and Goma asked at the same time, “By the way, why is your entire group fully armed?”

You’re gonna ask? Well, I guess they would.

“You’re not making a detour to a dungeon, right?” Sabato asked. “Aren’t you just heading straight back to Parth?”

“Sera-san’s even got those giant arms she used in the semifinals of the tournament,” Goma added.

The siblings looked confused as they bombarded us with questions. It was understandable, as everyone in my party was wearing full battle gear and had their respective weapons in hand—Sera had even cast Blood Scrimmage. Everyone who knew a buff spell had cast it on everyone else, and I was internally debating whether to cast Boreas Death Scythe on my staff.

“A trip technically isn’t over until you actually get home, right?” I replied. “As a Rank S adventurer, I thought we ought to properly put that attitude into practice to set an example for others. After all, there’s no telling when and where someone might come to assassinate us.”

“I-Is that true, Goma?”

“Why’re you asking me?”

Even I was aware that my half-assed answer was stretching it a bit. However, the way Sabato seemed to be taking my words at face value made *me* worry for *him* instead. In contrast, Jereol and Yujil were being considerate and staying out of the conversation. The truth was that I had also secretly applied for the right to bear arms in the castle. Considering the location, it had been a rather tall request, and the two had worked pretty hard to grant it.

I’m sorry for the trouble, but my companions’ safety is of the utmost importance to me.

“Is everyone ready? We’re opening the door soon.”

After looking around and seeing the others nod once, I stepped forward with Melfina. I placed my guild card in the groove and a hand on top to pour my mana into the device. Melfina placed her hand on mine.

::Look at us! We’re doing something together!::

For starters, let’s each give it 2,000 MP.

::Being ignored is really hurtful, honey::

Being told such a sweet line by Melfina when she was holding an MP potion in one hand prompted me to respond jokingly, but the truth was that I had also been somewhat self-conscious about the hand contact.

After our banter, I fixed a mental image of Parth in my mind and charged up the apparatus. My guild card shone gold as a steady, consistent light came on within the frame as if a light bulb had been turned on. The sight was markedly different from the twisting whirlpool that had appeared the other times we'd used such a device.

Okay, that seems to be enough MP. Between Mel and me, we did give it enough for four Rank S spells, after all. Uh, can you not stare so hard, court mages? It's embarrassing being the target of such passionate gazes.

While watching Mel down her MP potion out of the corner of my eye, I barked, "First squad, Gerard and Clotho!"

Both Sabato and Goma repeated, "First squad?!" in astonishment.

It makes sense to first confirm the situation on the other side of the gate, right? The best ones for the job are, of course, Gerard, who's our tank, and Clotho, who's sending a clone through. Ange said we should be fine, but it never hurts to be prepared. Not when our opponent is that cunning old codger, Riold.

"Very well! Let us go forth, Clotho!" Gerard cried, bracing his greatsword and shield as he charged into the gate alongside the slime.

Next was Sera and Melfina's turn. I was just about to give the order to proceed when Gerard's face reappeared from the gate. He beckoned, all the tension gone from his shoulders.

"My king, the situation's a bit different from what we were expecting."

I paused briefly, then ordered, "All right, everyone in!"

"See? I told you it'd be fine." Ange sighed.

Clearly, there was no Riold and no trap waiting for us. *I guess that works too.*

We bid our final farewells to everyone from Gaun and strode into the teleportation gate.

"What on earth was that all about?"

"I've given up trying to understand how Rank S adventurers think. What, do you think you know what father is thinking?"

I wasn't sure, but I thought I caught the start of a pretty rude conversation just before the gate closed. I didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as I found a truly unexpected person waiting on the Parthian side.

"Welcome back, Kelvin-san."

"Huh? Mist-san?"

The person who lifted her hand from the pedestal and waved it in

greeting was none other than the Guildmaster of the Toraj Adventurer's Guild, Mist. The gates needed someone with the right authorization to admit us on the other side as well, and apparently, she was the one who had performed that role today.

"I'm sorry for surprising you; you didn't expect me to be the one greeting you, did you?" Mist wiped a few beads of sweat off her forehead with a handkerchief. "I admit, I was quite surprised myself just now."

Ah, I suppose anyone would be surprised by seeing a suit of Demon Lord armor and a large slime suddenly jump through.

::When we got through, we just stared at each other in the most awkward atmosphere I had ever experienced,:: Gerard said.

Sorry, that's partly my fault.

Mist was quite low on the list of those I had expected to see on this side—I was under the impression she was still in Toraj—with a guild staff member being the next choice after Riold. Then again, that staff member would probably be surprised to see Ange's collar, so I reminded her to put on her scarf. It was still a bit too early to do the whole reveal and explanation.

"I'm very sorry, Mist-san," I apologized. "We were still a bit excited. Holiday mode and all that, you see." While speaking out loud, I also asked through the Network, *Sera, how's it looking?*

::There are no presences nearby that match Rio's signature. The city is completely at peace::

My conclusion was the same as Sera's. In other words, Riold truly was not around. There were no presences nearby, or indeed even within the city, that seemed remotely similar to his. He was likely still hiding somewhere on the Western Continent.

"Of course," Mist replied. "Well, there's no need to keep talking on our feet. Come join me in my office. We have quite a bit of catching up to do."

I sent all the maids but Efil home before following Mist upstairs with my friends. We went up a flight of stairs...then another...and found ourselves on the second floor.

"Here we are."

The room she led us to was the Guildmaster's room. The fixtures inside were just as I remembered. Since she had called this "my office," it could only mean...

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions. But first, take a seat. I'll explain everything."

Before I could vocalize what I was thinking, Mist had already gestured us towards the visitors' sofa. It was big enough to seat us all, so we obliged, with the exception of Efil and Gerard, who took up position behind me without saying a word. Efil being obstinate about

acting maid-like in public was nothing new, but it might have surprised some to know that Gerard was also a bit of a stickler for acting knightly at times like this.

Okay, we're ready. "So, what'd you want to talk about?"

After a slight pause, Mist said, "Rio, whom you knew as Guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer's Guild, submitted his resignation to the Adventurer's Guild HQ the other day. It seems he showed up suddenly, handed the letter to the receptionist, told them to pass it on to the Guildmaster General, then just left and was never heard from again."

"Really!" *So that's the path he took. I wonder if he decided to do it as soon as he found out Ange had failed to assassinate me or if he had prepared for the possibility long in advance.*

Either way, after Ange joined us, he obviously could not continue staying at the Parth Adventurer's Guild. He basically had three choices: erase us, erase his own position and disappear, or wage information warfare to bury us. Coming from Rio, that last one would have been a huge pain to deal with, so I was relieved to hear he had chosen the second option. Now that he had resigned, he would have lost his authority to use the teleportation gate in Parth as well. Of course, we were still going to take all the precautions we could.

Mist declared, "As I'm sure you've already realized, I've come to the Parth Adventurer's Guild as its new Guildmaster."

"Ahh, I figured," I started. "Hold on...what about the branch in Toraj, then?"

"I've instated someone who used to work for me as the new Guildmaster there. Her name is Suzu, and she's very talented, so there's no need to worry. If you have an opportunity to stop by Toraj again, please do pay the guild a visit. I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

"Of course, of course."

So, Mist-san is the new Guildmaster here. She and Riold go way back, so I'm sure she has rather complicated feelings about this arrangement. Based on what she just said, she has no idea why Riold went incognito. To suddenly be transferred to a new post—and not just any post, but the one he had just held...

"His resignation was truly sudden, making my transfer equally so," Mist continued. "Normally, this would cause a lot of mayhem and turmoil, but as it turned out, he had finished dealing with all the aftermath and subsequent paperwork related to the Demon Lord incident. Not only that, he even set up systems for passing down his work and duties. Thanks to that, my installation went so smoothly even I couldn't believe it. I knew he'd gotten somewhat eccentric and whimsical with age, but I guess that part of him is still the same..."

Mist turned to look up at the ceiling, smiling faintly as if enjoying

memories of the past. Suddenly, she brought her gaze back. “Ah, I’m sorry. I went off on a tangent.”

Ah, was he a troublemaker back in the day? In any case, this means he had the presence of mind to get things in order for the person who’d be succeeding his position. I guess it’s safe to assume he’d planned on leaving, then.

Ange lifted her hand hesitantly. “Um, Guildmaster Mist, it’s difficult for me to bring this up, but...”

Oh, right. She also has to announce her resignation, just like Riold did.

“You’re Ange-san, yes? I’ve looked over the notes Rio left behind. He mentioned that you intend to resign quite soon. Losing such a valuable talent now that Rio is gone is truly a pity and pains my heart, but I understand.”

“Thank you, Guildmaster.”

Huh? He already knew Ange would be resigning?

Noticing my expression, Ange said, “Regardless of whether I succeeded in killing you or not, I would have lost my reason for staying in Parth. Analyzer probably foresaw this and made preparations accordingly. This is perfect for us. Let’s make use of it.”

Ahh, I see. Okay, that sounds like a good id— Wait, if we just go along with this, then your resignation wouldn’t cause a commotion, right?

“By the way, may I ask why you’re resigning?” Mist asked. “That was the only field Rio left blank.”

“Of course! It’s because—”

“No, don’t—”

I desperately tried to cut in, but Ange’s high Agility helped her speak with incredible speed too.

“I’m getting married to Kelvin!”

Oh god, she skipped over everything. Ange-san, you skipped over everything in the middle! Couldn’t you have gone a bit more into the process?! Though I do have to give you kudos for not mentioning the slave thing.

“Oh my, how wonderful!” Mist exclaimed. “This calls for red bean rice! Ah, do you know about red bean rice? It’s a tradition in Toraj—”

Mist beamed with the biggest smile she had shown all day as she chattered on.

Ah, I can see how this is going to go. Tomorrow, everyone in the guild is going to know the news. Yep, let’s just go home. We’ve stayed long enough today.



When a good stopping point had come up, I’d cut in, promised Mist that we would visit again the next day, and slipped out without any of the other guild staff noticing. As soon as we arrived home, I

collapsed onto the large sofa in our living room. A short while later, Rion and Shutola walked in.

“Huh? Kel-nii got the sofa before we did. That’s rare.”

“Are you tired?”

I mumbled, “Mm, a lot happened today. I’m tired. Mentally.”

“Then you keep the sofa. Are you facing An-nee’s fan club tomorrow?”

“Ange’s already told Mist-san she’s marrying me. There’s no getting out of it anymore. I so don’t want tomorrow to come.”

“Honestly, I feel like everyone already kinda knows An-nee likes you.”

“Even if they know, I still have to announce it properly. The other adventurers are my colleagues and they deserve the courtesy.”

“That’s the right thing to do,” Shutola agreed. “It’s important to properly maintain your relationships, both with other individual people and with countries.”

“Ah...you’re right. I’ll do my best.” *I was just admonished by Shutola. If the future Trycenian monarch says so, then I’m sure it’s right.*

Ange, the topic of our conversation, had gone to her rented place to bring her stuff over. She had said she planned on taking her time with the process and bringing over only what she really needed first, which probably meant she was only grabbing a few outfits and daily necessities today.

“By the way, Shutola, have you chosen your skills yet? You really agonized over it, didn’t you?”

“Mm-hm! I asked Rion-chan and decided with her! We are going to try them out in the underground training hall sometime. Oh, that’s right, I have to ask dearest sister Efil to help too.”

“I’m sure Efil-nee will make you something really cute!”

“What’ll you be asking Efil for?” *Having to use the training hall means it’s a battle-oriented skill, right? What would Efil make that’s cute that’d be related?*

Both girls grinned mischievously and each cutely placed a finger over her lips, saying, “It’s a secret!” at the same time.

Kilto, my comrade, this is where Shangri-La exists. Well, I guess I now have another thing to look forward to.



“If that’s how you wanna play it, then it’s also a secret what I’ll be making next.”

“What? You’re making something, Kel-nii?!”

Rion’s eyes sparkled. Unfortunately, what I was making this time wasn’t for her.

“We’ve been getting our hands on pretty sweet materials lately, but I haven’t had time to make good use of them. I plan on spending the next week whipping up a whole bunch of stuff.”

Sera had promised she’d be helping me out. Being someone who liked to get into the right headspace for something by starting with wearing the right clothes, she even said she’d do it in her lab coat and fashion glasses. She was most likely in the middle of digging through her closet for the outfit at the moment. And of course, during the week, I also planned on continuing to gather what information I could on Riold and the Apostles.

“You have about a week to test and finalize your skill set and battle style,” I told the two girls. “Once I’m done making this batch of equipment, we’ll be going on a trip again.”

“Where’re we going?” Rion asked.

Sensing Sera approaching, I sat up, took a deep breath to shore up my motivation and energy, then answered, “The Holy Empire of Deramis.”



Dahak whistled cheerily as he brought hedge clippers to the garden that had gone untended for so long. The sky was clear, the sun was almost at its zenith, and the air smelled of rich greenery. It wasn’t as if anything had happened between returning to Parth yesterday and this moment that put him in such a good mood; Dahak was generally in high spirits whenever he was working with plants and crops.

“Looks like you’re already getting right back into it, Hak-chan.”

Dahak turned around. “Ah, m’lady! Yes, I am. I mean, I do this ’cus I want to. Is Alex resting in your shadow?”

“Mm-hm.” Rion nodded, smiling. “He’s taking an afternoon nap. He ate a bit too much for lunch.”

Suddenly, Shutola’s face poked out from behind Rion’s figure. She studied the garden. “I wouldn’t have imagined it from how you look, but you have a pretty deft hand. The trees and flowers are all really happy.”

“Oh, hey there, squirt.”

“Who’re you calling a squirt?! I’m only a little smaller than Rion-chan!”

At the very beginning, Shutola had been so shy that she was

practically glued to Rion's back. Now, however, she had gotten so familiar with the group that not a hint of her past self remained. In fact, she was even capable of talking back to the dragon who looked like a delinquent. Then again, this was perhaps also part of Dahak's own nature—children seemed to get attached to him easily.

"M'lady's different, all right? She might be small, but that chest of hers is deeper and wider than you can imagine."

"S-Small? My chest? I-It's true that even Ruka-chan's surpassed me lately, but..."

"That wasn't what I was talking about!"

Shutola looked between the two in bewilderment. "Um, what're you talking about?"

Rion recalled that, although Shutola's build was now similar to her own, she was originally quite voluptuous and tall. The fruitless nature of the effort she put in every day plunged Rion into despair, prompting her to bring her hands up to her chest.

Sensing that he had touched a nerve, Dahak tried to change the subject to one he expected Rion would latch on to. "Oh, that's right! We're going to Deramis next week! I heard it from Brother when he came back with Ange from the guild."

"Huh?" Rion looked up. "Oh, yep, I've heard. Kel-nii said, 'We're going to the heart of the Holy Order of Rinne to look for clues about Elearis and the Apostles.'"

"Deramis!" Shutola exclaimed. "I wonder if I'll get to see Colette-chan?"

"I'm sure you will. When we arrive, let's find her and go hang out!"

Thanks to Shutola moving the conversation along—though not intentionally as Dahak had done—Rion seemed to have come back. The dragon heaved a quiet sigh of relief and pumped a fist out of sight of the two girls.

"Oh, by the way, Kel-nii's back, right? Is he in the house?" Rion's face made it clear that she was wanting to hang out with her brother, but Dahak shook his head.

"He is back, but he went straight to his workshop. Sister Sera is probably with him."

"Awww. That means he probably won't come back out until dinner."

Once Kelvin was immersed in one of his hobbies, he would not emerge until he was satisfied with his work or mealtime came around. Rion did not like bothering him, so she rarely went into the forge. Dahak knew that.

"Speaking of the workshop, Kel-nii said one of the things he's working on this time is for you, Hak-chan. When you turn into a

dragon, you can't use your human equipment, right? So he's making something for your dragon form."

"Yep, that's what Brother told me! That giant golem gave him a ton of great materials. He's working on something for Boga, Mdo, and me. Y'see, when I was in Gaun, I realized that Combat Technique works even when I'm a dragon! Adding equipment that Brother is personally making for me on top of that... Oh, I'm getting pumped up just thinking about it!"

"Are you... Are you crying, Hak-chan? Oh, c'mon, it's okay." Shutola gingerly clambered up the ladder that Dahak was on and gave his head a few reassuring pats.

"Huh?! I'm not!" Dahak blustered. "This is sweat! I'm so moved that I'm sweating! And it's dangerous up here, so please go back down, okay?"

"How do you even sweat from feeling moved?" Rion asked wryly. "But fair enough. At any rate, where's An-nee? She should have come back with Kel-nii, right?"

"Last I heard, she's teaching Ruka how to fight in the underground training hall. She was all like, 'I'm going to make her the best assassin ever!' and Ruka seemed really excited. I guess they're practically master and disciple now."

"Isn't Ruka-chan's main job to be a maid?"

"Just think of it as Ruka-chan learning self-defense techniques!"

Are assassination and self-defense techniques that similar? Hmm, since it's Shutola-chan saying so, I guess it must be true. Rion decided to drop the matter. "How about we head for the training hall? We can continue where we left off yesterday."

"Sure!" Shutola nodded. "See you later, Dahak!"

"Don't rush too much and trip, y'hear? Ah, they're already gone." Dahak turned towards the door of the house just in time to see it close with a soft click.



"Are you sure you want to do this?" Huba asked, Cataract Lance in hand. "I may not look it, but I was considered pretty strong in Trycen."

"It's not real training if you don't get serious," Shutola replied, adjusting the feel of the large backpack over her shoulders. "I want to see how well I can perform."

Upon finding Huba "taking a break"—basically, playing hooky—in the training hall, Shutola had asked her for some sparring practice. Huba couldn't very well refuse a direct request from her mistress, so she had accepted, expecting to do a few simple military drills. To her surprise, it had turned into a full-on practice match.

“Do your best, Shutola-chan!” Ange cheered.

“Who do you think is gonna win, Teacher?!” Ruka asked excitedly.

“That’s the wrong question, my disciple. A true professional would ready themselves for what comes, no matter who wins. Come on, it’s time to prepare for a congratulatory feast!”

In the bleachers was a teacher-student pair enjoying the spectacle in their own way, sitting next to a very still Rosalia, who had a smile frozen on her face. Even from a distance, the fury behind that smile was palpable. Huba thought she could almost hear Rosalia saying, “So you skipped work again, did you?”

Could this situation be more awkward? And why is Rosalia here?! I can tell she’s already dead set on punishing me after this! Huba thought.

Part of the awkwardness she was feeling was related to Shutola herself. Or to be more specific, it was what the girl carried on her back that made it awkward. Huba was familiar with the two black, beady eyes staring at her. After all, she saw them practically every time she saw Shutola.

Even so, isn’t the size a bit...off? Is it me, or did it get really big?

Huba stared at the round face protruding from the backpack. It belonged to the stuffed teddy bear Shutola was so fond of—a premium limited edition item or something like that. However, the one Shutola normally carried around was so small that she could hold it in one arm.

Okay, I can’t be imagining it; it really did get bigger. Only the head is visible and it’s already larger than Shutola-sama’s face. In fact, the head is twice as big as the rest of the backpack. I can’t imagine it looking good with those proportions... Either way, that can’t be the teddy bear she’s always holding.

The plushie’s beady eyes and Shutola’s fired-up eyes stared directly at Huba as her mind raced. This was why she was feeling so awkward.

“If I may be so forward, I, Rosalia, shall serve as the referee for this match.”

“WHAT?!” Huba shouted in surprise, having been so focused on her opponent that she had failed to notice Rosalia’s approach.

“Something to say, Huba?”

“N-N-No, of course not!”

“If Shutola-sama wins, she’ll get a special pudding made by Efil-sama as a snack. In addition, Huba’s assigned cleaning area will be doubled. If Huba wins, her assigned cleaning area will be doubled. Does this work for both sides?”

“Yay, special pudding! Does Rion-chan get some too?”

“Of course.”

“H-Hold on a moment! Did I hear that right? I must have heard wrong!”

“I’m sorry, Huba. I misspoke. If Shutola-sama wins, your assigned cleaning area is *tripled*.”

“NOOOOOO!”

Regardless of the outcome of the match, Rosalia’s anger remained. Huba’s attempt at protesting had only made things worse.

Ignoring her companion’s cry of despair, Rosalia ordered both sides to assume their starting positions. Once they had readied themselves, she gave the signal. “Ready... FIGHT!”

“Let’s do this, Georgios!”

With a soft explosion accompanied by white smoke and an almost comical *pomf*, someone leaped out from Shutola’s backpack. Of course, that someone was the teddy bear whose head had been protruding all this time. Although she was fast gaining a reputation as an incorrigible slacker at the Celsius residence, Huba did possess fighting prowess that lived up to the title of Lieutenant General of the Dragon Knight Order. Her head cooled down in a split second as she took stock of the situation.

But still, “Georgios”? Huba giggled inwardly at what was likely the bear’s name, but her laughter soon gave way to confusion.

Pomf, pomf.

The plushie’s footsteps sounded through the smoke screen. It was a sound that seemed entirely unrelated to fighting, but that did not matter as Georgios came into view. Its round, beady eyes and soft, fluffy face were both as cute and charming as ever—that was nothing new, as it was the same head that had been visible before. The problem was everything below the head.

“I-Isn’t it a bit *too* big?” Huba blurted out as sweat flowed down her face.

The body of the teddy bear was chestnut-colored; that was normal. What wasn’t was its size. It was far more massive than the largest plushies sold in famous theme parks, practically matching giant, vicious, bearlike monsters pound for pound. In fact, it was so much taller than Huba that she had to look up at it. At the end of its long arms gleamed jet-black claws that looked as sharp as razors, cutting a sharp contrast to the cute face on top.

Shutola was sitting on one of the teddy bear’s shoulders, looking smug. “Cute, right? Efil-san made him for me.”



“Of course, Shutola-sama. It’s very cute—no, no, no, that’s not the point! How is that thing moving by itself?! Did you possess it with a spirit?!”

“What’re you saying, Huba? Georgios isn’t moving by himself.”

“What?”

Shutola’s blank look of confusion was reflected in Huba’s face.

“Ah, I guess she doesn’t know about this skill,” Shutola murmured. “I suppose that makes sense. Even I’d only heard of it being used for small tricks.”

“Um, what was that, Shutola-sama?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Well, as they say, it’s faster to show than to tell. Here.”

Shutola showed the backs of her hands, revealing that there was something on each of her fingers. When she moved them in an exaggerated manner, Georgios lifted its arm.

“Is...it a puppet?”

“Correct! After thinking about it lots, I decided to learn Puppetry. This way, even though I’m weak, I can still be of help to dearest brother and Rion-chan!” Shutola explained cheerfully, rocking her body left and right. She was clearly very fond of Georgios.

“It...sure makes an impact,” Huba managed. “Have you tried using it in a fight yet?”

“Rion-chan assured me that this works, but anyway, that’s what we’re doing now. Um...are you ready? Can we start yet?”

Fwoosh!

The moment Shutola’s question left her mouth, Huba charged towards Georgios as fast as she could. One could make the case that it was a cheap move, but the match had technically already begun. Huba was not concerned with appearing honorable—under Azgrad’s hellish training, she had learned the importance of making the first move. Cataract Lance activated, penetrating Georgios while blasting water—presumably a weakness of the cloth-based plushie—from its tip.

“You shouldn’t let your guard down, Shutola-sama!”

“Neither should you.”

“What?!”

Huba was forced to abruptly retreat from the clash as Georgios’s arm formed a crater in the ground—which was made of adamantite, just like all the walls of the training hall—right where she had been standing. In contrast, the damage done to the bear with Huba’s lance was hardly noticeable. Georgios looked none the worse for wear.

If I take one of those punches head-on, I really will die! And what’s up with that plushie’s cloth?! Even soaking wet, it stretched so much that my

lance couldn't get through!

Complaints flooded Huba's mind, and for good reason. This match, which she had casually accepted, had turned into a genuine fight for her life. Ange intended to step in if things truly got dicey, but of course, Huba had no idea about that.

"Teacher, how would you fight if you were down there?" Ruka asked curiously.

Huba immediately pricked up her ears, hoping for a hint to help her out of her current predicament.

"Hmm...I guess I'd start with taking off the head?"

"But that's gonna ruin the cute teddy!"

Unfortunately, reality lived up to its cruel reputation and let Huba down. If she were fast enough to behead Georgios, she wouldn't have been in need of advice. She was already struggling to pierce the giant plushie's stomach; how was she supposed to get all the way up to its neck and chop through it?

"Did you know about this teddy bear, Rion-chan?" Ruka asked curiously.

"Well, Georgios was actually made by Efil-nee based on the design of Shutola-chan's teddy bear," Rion replied. "It looks like it's made of cloth, right? But it's actually as waterproof and tough as Rank S armor. The claws sewn onto its arms were taken from the evil dragon we killed and strengthened by Kel-nii to deal more damage."

Ruka clapped her hands. "Wow, so Master and Efil-sama worked together on this!"

"I see." Ange nodded. "No wonder it's so powerful."

"Kel-nii doesn't actually know about this yet, though," Rion added somewhat mischievously. "When Shutola and I went to ask him to help with the claws, he did it for us immediately, but we didn't tell him what they were for."

The longer Rion talked, the more Huba felt victory slipping from her grasp. *What is that Master with a sister complex even doing?! I mean, it's a good thing Shutola-sama is happy, but still!*

At the start of the fight, Huba had decided to not attack Shutola directly. Now, however, she realized she was in no position to be handicapping herself. She brought her weapon to bear and unleashed a long-range attack powerful enough to knock someone unconscious.

"Pierce, Cataract Lance!"

Water poured out of Cataract Lance and formed the maximum number of projectiles that Huba could control. All of them shot forward, aiming for the area above Georgios's shoulder where Shutola was perched.

With a cute "Yah!" the young girl flung her right arm sideways. Huba braced herself, closely studying Georgios to catch any sign of its

movement. However...

“What?!”

All the flying water lances were suddenly torn apart, erased so completely it was as if they had never existed.

“Those threads wrapped around Shutola-chan’s fingers are special too,” Rion continued. “Mel-nee made them when Shutola-chan went to ask her. I guess you could call it a magic item that creates threads out of MP. They can’t be cut because they’re made of MP, and Shutola-chan can freely move them however she wants. When she imbues them with even more MP, she can use them to attack. That’s what she just did.”

“Wow, the work of all the artisans of our family is out in full force!”

Both Ange and Ruka expressed their surprise. According to Rion’s much-appreciated commentary, what they had just seen was Shutola using her threads to cancel out Huba’s attack. In other words, the young girl was capable of controlling her teddy bear while directly dishing out attacks. To top it off, her threads were practically invisible.

Ugh, I won’t be able to slack off again for a while. How long will it take to clean three times my usual area?

Huba was starting to make peace with her fate while getting as serious as she had been for her fierce battle with Efil. We will not mention who won that match, but suffice it to say that snack time that day was much fancier than usual.



Roughly an hour before Shutola and Huba’s match, Kelvin and Ange were at the Parth Adventurer’s Guild. The atmosphere was bizarre: on one side, Ange was surrounded by her former colleagues, all of them showering her with blessings; on the other, Kelvin was surrounded by *his* colleagues, all men, who—despite only being Rank B at best—had bursting muscles and looked more than intimidating. There was no more stark contrast of delight and suffering in the same scene. If someone walked into the guild at that very moment, they would have likely backed up a few steps...then joined one group.

“Bro, what’s the meaning of this?!”

“I mean...it’s...y’know...”

“We’re asking ’cus we *don’t* know!”

The man speaking on behalf of the mob, which was currently emanating killing intent, jabbed a finger towards the reception counter where Ange was. This was the very clash with Ange’s fan club that Kelvin had been dreading.

Kelvin and Ange had thoroughly planned out how today would

go. Their basic approaches—which they had confirmed with each other twice, then thrice—boiled down to hiding the fact that Ange was now a slave, being vague about the details of how they had gotten together, and doing their best not to aggravate those present.

Kelvin had shored up his resolve and charged into the guild with the intention of taking whatever punches came his way until things blew over. However, contrary to his plans, Ange had been immediately whisked away by the women the moment she'd stepped in and proceeded to spill the beans on every last detail. Kelvin knew there was no telling what would happen once girls started getting into love stories, but it was too late. The abridged narrative of how they had gotten engaged spread through the guild like wildfire, leading to their current predicament. The silver lining was that Ange had managed to hold back the one important detail that she was now a slave.

“Oh my, oh my!”

The thought of asking the new Guildmaster for help flashed through Kelvin's mind, but he dismissed it immediately. At the moment, Mist was no more than an older lady in the neighborhood tickled with gossip about love. She was there in the crowd, badgering Ange with questions just like everyone else.

“Ugh... I knew who Ange-chan liked... I knew, but still! ARGH!”

“How dare you lay hands on my goddess when you already have Efil-chan!”

“Wait, are you going to go after your own sister too?!”

One thing that Kelvin had not expected was that almost all the single adventurers based in Parth were actually Ange's fans—although given how fervent they were, it might have been more apt to call them worshippers. Basically, Kelvin was surrounded by enemies on all sides. The head of the fan club was one of the buff guys from the Rank B adventurer party led by Uld, which should not have been surprising as Uld was the only one in the group who was married. Of course, it was no more surprising that the other two members of that party were also in the crowd.

“As I keep saying, our relationship is entirely wholesome—”

“Wholesome?! I call bullshit!”

“Bro, we know that you went on a trip with her recently!”

“Goddammit! What part of that sounds wholesome?! I bet you went all the way with her, didn't you?!”

Kelvin clutched his head. *Where did you hear that?! What are you, a stalker?!* The truth was that Kelvin had indeed slept with Ange, but all they had done was *sleep*. None of the wonderful things the adventurers were wailing about had happened.

On the other side of the guild, the conversation was going very

differently.

“So, how far have you gone with him?! How did you snag him?!”

“No, no, we haven’t done anything yet! All I did was tell him I love him!” Ange insisted before adding, under her breath, “and chop off his head.”

“More deets, now!”

“Really, that’s it!”

Unfortunately, what was being said by the women was not registering for the emotionally charged men. Even if it had, however, they would have likely read too much into it, only worsening the situation.

“You seemed to be keeping Ange at arm’s length for some reason, so I thought I had a chance!”

Kelvin really wanted to reply with, “It’s not that I was keeping her at arm’s length, it’s that I misunderstood her a little,” but he swallowed the words. After all, he did not expect people to understand the true dynamic between them. Theirs was a tumultuous love between an assassin who wanted the head of her beloved and a battle junkie who sought the thrill of life-and-death battle with her. No normal person could—and none should attempt to—replace either one of them in the relationship.

All Kelvin could do was avoid making excuses and assert that he would treasure Ange and take good care of her. He was ready to accept whatever came of it, be it punches, kicks, or his reputation plummeting. That was what it meant to wed Ange.

But just as he had convinced himself of this and opened his mouth to speak...

“So, that’s why you gotta take good care of her! You hear me, man?”

“Huh?” The sudden shift in mood took Kelvin by surprise.

Someone sighed. “At the end of the day, all we want is for Ange-chan to be happy.”

“Yeah, what he said. The unspoken rule was always that no matter who she chose, the rest wouldn’t hold it against him.”

“I’ve pretty much said everything I wanted to get off my chest!”

“Now I have no regrets. That’s strange, why am I crying?”

“GAH! Get it together, dude!”

“I’m sure Kelvin-san will protect and provide for Ange-chan better than any of us, honestly. Th-This is the best outcome... Yeah, it is!”

The guys were all changing their tone, each congratulating Kelvin in his own way with shoulder pats, back claps, handshakes, and other gestures. Their faces looked relieved, as if a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

“You guys...” Warmth filled Kelvin’s chest. He felt like a guy who,

after multiple attempts, had finally convinced the father of his girlfriend to bless their marriage. All he had to do now was give voice to what he was thinking.

“I swear that I’m going to make Ange ha—”

However, things rarely go as one wishes, and disaster often strikes at the most inconvenient of times.

“By the way, what’s with the scarf, Ange? Is it a gift?”

“Wow, it looks really expensive! Aw, I’m so jealous! Can I see it?”

“Ah, no, don’t touch—”

The scarf wrapped around Ange’s neck slid off without a sound, revealing the collar beneath that indicated she was a slave. And since she had suddenly raised her voice, everyone in the room turned to look her way.

“A-Ange, that’s...”

“Ehe heh heh... Yeah, I became Kelvin’s slave. Oh, but I’m happy! Don’t misunderstand!”

Unfortunately, this did Kelvin no favors. Ange sent him an apologetic look for letting the cat out of the bag, but the men surrounding Kelvin caught it as well. As he repeatedly insisted that it was a misunderstanding, he caught a brief glance out the window. The clear skies from before were now covered by dark, roiling clouds.

“Kelvin, you...”

“Let’s have a talk out back, shall we?”

“Let me punch you once.”

“I’m gonna go fetch my best sword.”

An hour later, while Dahak was hard at work in his garden, he found Kelvin sitting there forlornly, depressed about this world’s truly unfair timing.



After returning home, Ange made her way to the training hall while I headed straight to the workshop to make new weapons and armor. Sera was already there in her casual wear, tinkering with some of the base golems lying around while she waited for me.

“Ow... Those guys sure didn’t hold back...”

“You’re hurting? But you’re not wounded.”

“My heart hurts.”

Insisting that I would be fine, being Rank S and all, my fellow adventurers had attacked me at full strength. They were right, of course—even the attacks that had landed properly did almost no damage to me whatsoever. However, being the target of jealousy, resentment, and bitterness coming from those I had been close to did get to me. Then again, after venting their pent-up feelings, everyone had once again given me their blessings, echoing each other’s cries of

“Go and be happy!”

“It’s proof of how much trust you’ve built up in this city,” Melfina said as she Summoned herself out.

*She didn’t say anything this whole time, so I thought she was asleep—
Oh, that was on purpose.*

“You were watching all along?”

“Mm-hm. After all, it’d be troubling if anything happened to you. I’m glad my worries were unfounded, though.”

“Which sounds very caring and decent of you, but...you were just enjoying it, weren’t you?”

“That’s...half-correct.”

This goddess just admitted to getting a kick out of watching someone else’s misery!

“Oh, don’t make that face, honey. Half of me really was worried for you.”

“And the other half?”

“Was enjoying the show like you wouldn’t believe!”

That’s one of the brightest smiles she’s shown lately. What, is she trying to dump all her stress on me in preparation for our trip to Deramis? If that’s the case... Yeah, I’ll let it go. She’s probably going to have a tough time over there.

“You should probably leave it there, Mel,” Sera cut in. “Kelvin’s feeling all down now.”

“So he is. Sorry, honey. The adventurers support you because they really do trust you. I meant what I said earlier. Most Rank S adventurers are treated as highly dangerous and kept at arm’s length. In contrast, everyone back at the guild was entirely frank with their feelings—against you, a Rank S adventurer who has a reputation as a battle junkie. There’s no need to overthink what happened; you can let it go and simply focus on doing what you love doing.”

“Are you sure?”

“A hundred percent.”

They trust me, so that’s why they’re frank with me. I guess that might be true, considering how they reacted at the end. It’s a relief to know that everything I’ve built up so far wasn’t for nothing.

Melfina sighed. “Honey, if today’s fallout is enough to get to you, you won’t be able to survive when the real fight comes.”

“Uh...asking just in case, but what do you mean by ‘the real fight?’”

“You sure you want me to answer that?” She returned a smile that seemed to ask implicitly, “You already know what I’m referring to, don’t you?” It was a very beautiful smile, but it gave me a small shudder.

“N-Nah, I guess I’m good...”

If such a situation comes to be, it's not only me who'll be in danger; it'll probably be the whole city. I can guarantee it'll be a catastrophe like nothing we've ever seen before. Thankfully, everyone's happy with how things are now. Peace is truly the best.

Sensing the lull in the conversation, Sera said, "If we're done talking, let's get to work! We have to finish up before we go to Deramis, right?" She threw on her lab coat with a stylish flourish and put on her prescriptionless glasses.

Did you practice that? You looked really natural doing that move just now.

"You're right. I've come up with a way to further reinforce Gerard's shield, so let's focus on that today. Hm? Mel, what're you holding?"

Just as I was about to look down at the blueprints on my workbench, I caught sight of what was in Mel's hand. *If I remember correctly, that's her toolbox for when she makes her accessories.*

"I thought I'd help out too. You're putting crests on the equipment, right?"

"You have time?"

"Sure I do. My Accessory Craftsmanship skill is just right for the job, so leave it to me."

"Glad to hear it. Thanks!"

The crest that Mel mentioned was my family's—as in, the Celsius family's—crest. After Rion and I had officially acquired "Celsius" as a family name through the Naming Ceremony in Gaun, the idea of making a family crest came up while we were on our trip.

Rion was in charge of the design, having recently picked up the Painting skill. She'd had plenty of experience as an artist in her previous life, so much so that she could draw many times better than me even without the Painting skill. But now that she had it—and at Rank S, no less!—she could paint with watercolors, ink, oil, and anything else like a master. It was a whole world that I couldn't even begin to understand, but when she drew something in manga-style, even a layman like me could tell how incredible she had become.

I mean, she could draw in the style of any mangaka I named without looking at a single reference. No normal fourteen-year-old can do that.

With Rion-sensei's pen at the ready, my party began discussing how our crest should look. There were a large variety of crests in this world: some liked to include dragons or other powerful monsters to signify strength, knights liked to include swords or shields to signify their dedication to duty, Torajians liked to include flowers, Gaunians liked to include fangs or claws, and so on. In other words, as long as there was intention behind the choice, almost any image could be used in a crest, so it took quite a while for us to come to an

agreement.

One idea that made it to the end was my suggestion to take the blue briars from Melfina's Rank S spell Celsius Briar as a design base. Those in favor were Dahak, the vegetarian dragon who loved everything related to plants, Melfina, who had already expressed support for the idea beforehand, and Efil.

As a counterproposal, Sera and Rion had expressed strong support for going with Grim Reaper. It made me happy that they wanted to incorporate my alias somehow, but I wasn't quite sure about having something so ominous represent our party.

"Stuff like this is common for demons!" Sera insisted. "Practically every family has a skull or a guillotine or a black cat!"

They're all symbols of misfortune! We're not making a pirate flag here! I thought, but to my surprise, Ange threw her support behind Sera's idea. *Does it appeal to her sensibilities as an assassin?*

This left us with three against three votes, so we all looked at the person who would serve as tiebreaker, Gerard. He crossed his arms and, after considering long and hard, said, "What do you all think about a heartwarming crest depicting a grandpa surrounded by his grandchi—"

"How about I combine both ideas into one design?" Rion had asked, in response to which everyone said, "Okay!"

Thus it had been decided that the Celsius family crest would be a grim reaper surrounded by blue briars. Still, Rion made it tastefully abstract to the point where someone would go, "Oh, I think I see it," only if it was pointed out to them. Exactly how it looked will be left up to your imagination.

We had then submitted this crest to the Adventurer's Guild to be put into the Adventurer Directory and distributed throughout the world. This would help us to use the fame of Rank S adventurer status to avoid unnecessary conflicts. It was true that I loved fights, but I could definitely do without scuffles like with that pig prince from Trycen and Nagua from Gaun. As long as we had our crest on our armor or weapon in a visible area, the majority of people would know better than to mess with us. Anyone who was still confident enough to pick a fight with us was more than welcome.

Then again, people like the pig prince and Nagua wouldn't care. But seeing as we aren't adding the crest to our casual wear, it's not like we're being all that purposeful about this.

To be honest, all of that was more or less just an excuse. The real reason we were putting this on our gear was Rion's statement of "It'd look cool!" She had clearly taken a huge liking to the whole crest thing.

"Mel, make sure to put it on Arondight and Queen's Terror too!"

“You’ll have to ask Efil to do it on Queen’s Terror.”
Oh, here’s someone else who’s also really taken a liking to it.



Chapter 2: The Holy Empire of Deramis

One week passed, and it came time for our party to set off for Deramis. I'd finished creating all the gear I wanted to make for my companions, and they had all had a chance to give their new equipment a spin. Overall, progress was on schedule.

There were no reports of any movement from the Apostles, so things were peaceful. Oh, right—Rion and Shutola showed me the results of their secret training yesterday. I admit, it really surprised me. The idea to use a plushie as a weapon had never occurred to me, and now that Shutola had the Puppetry skill, there was a lot she could do in battle even by herself. On a whim, I'd had her try to control my golems, and she'd pulled it off. The more she familiarized herself with her strings, the more puppets she could control at once. I was truly excited to see what she would eventually become capable of.

"Shutola-sama, did you bring your handkerchief?" Rosalia asked, fussing over her.

Shutola nodded. "Of course I did."

"How about the plushie that you need to hug to sleep at night?" Huba added.

Starting to get a little huffy, the young girl told her attendants, "Gosh, you're both worrying too much! I have everything I need!"

Hey, Shutola, it's not like I don't get what you're feeling, but cut them some slack. Parents and guardians can't help fussing; that's just how it is.

"Are you sure we shouldn't come along? We're supposed to be Shutola-sama's guards."

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Huba, since she'll be with Master and his party. What's more, Shutola-sama is now more powerful than you."

"Ugh, don't say that! If you do, my reason for being here becomes..."

I wasn't sure what had happened, but Huba had been working really hard of late. From what I could see, she was doing three times her usual amount of work and wasn't slacking off anymore. That driven-against-the-wall feeling she was giving off did bother me a little, though.

"Please take care of the house while we're gone," Efil told Ellie and Ruka a slight distance away. "If anything happens, please find

Mist-san at the Adventurer's Guild."

Ellie bowed. "Of course, Efil-sama."

"Take care of Master, Efil-sama!" Ruka said cheerfully, earning a knock on her head from her mother. The way she acted often made me worry about her, but Ruka was someone who properly fulfilled her duties. I had also heard that under Ange's tutelage, her assassination skills were improving, although I wasn't quite sure when she would actually need to employ that particular skill set.

When everyone's farewells were done, I said, "All right, we're heading out. We'll see you when we're back!"

All the maids, lined up neatly on the front porch, bowed and replied in unison, "Have a safe trip!"



The clattering of wheels filled my ears.

How long has it been since I last rode in a carriage? If I remember correctly, it was when I went to Toraj, wasn't it? After that, it became faster for me to run. Oh well, traveling slowly and leisurely isn't bad once in a while. This carriage is much higher quality than the last one, and I can barely feel the shaking.

"So, we aren't using the teleportation gate this time!" Sera exclaimed, excitedly peeking out the windows.

"Dearest sister Sera, you must settle down. There are knights attending us, so we must act more ladylike," Shutola scolded her primly while trying her best to act elegant. However, she was talking to Sera, who was sufficiently entertained by the passing landscape. I'd bet if it wasn't for her Clip of Camouflage, we would be seeing her demon tail waving vigorously. I don't think anyone else knew, but Sera's tail often expressed her emotions in a manner similar to that of a dog.

"We can't use the gate because I still haven't received the authorization on Deramis's side," I replied, "though if we're lucky, Colette might be able to use her connections to get me authorized when we arrive."

"I still can't believe this escort we're getting. Pretty wild, right, Alex?"

"Arf." (So fancy.)

Both Rion and Alex—who was still in her shadow—seemed a little uncomfortable. Truth was, so was I. We were currently on the road to Deramis; however, something we did not expect had occurred.

"I'm truly sorry for intruding on your journey. The Oracle insisted and simply refused to budge..."

"Oh, no, no, it's fine. I completely understand where you're coming from."

“Ah...thank you for your understanding, Kelvin-san.”

Right outside the window of our carriage was a white horse ridden by none other than Cliff Strogav, the Captain of the Holy Order of Knights. Colette had somehow sensed that we were setting off for Deramis and dispatched a company of knights and the magnificent silver-traced carriages we were currently riding in. Sera, Rion, and Shutola were riding with me while everyone else was in carriages behind ours. I couldn't even imagine the hoops she'd had to jump through to get authorization to send armed forces past Deramis's borders and into Parth's territory.

The holy knights kept pace alongside us, drawing incredulous stares from the occasional traveling merchant we passed. I could hardly blame them; I was painfully aware of how much we looked like a parade. Melfina had almost fainted when she first caught sight of the group waiting for us at the gates of Parth.

“There are a lot of checkpoints between here and the capital of Deramis, but with us accompanying you, you'll be able to pass through easily. There are some places that would require you to stop for a whole day, so, um...”

“In other words, we wouldn't be able to just fly over all of them on dragonback, right? It's fine, Captain Cliff. I'm thankful to Colette. Really.”

For a while now, Captain Cliff had been repeatedly apologizing to me in a roundabout way. I knew he was doing it to show his consideration, but honestly, it was only making things more awkward. That said, there was no denying that this was indeed the fastest way for us to reach Deramis. After all, we couldn't very well enter the country illegally like we'd done in Trycen, so we were all thankful to Colette—Melfina included. There was no denying that the Oracle had helped us out on quite a few occasions by now. However, courage was necessary to thank her directly. I'm sure you catch my drift. If possible, I did not want Rion and Shutola to witness the sight.

“So, how much longer to Deramis?” Sera asked curiously.

“Well, if we avoid pitching camp by staying at the checkpoints...” Cliff paused to do some mental calculation. “I'd say five days.”

Sera made a noncommittal sound. “Quite a while yet.”

“We would be making much better time if we could use pegasi, but I'm afraid their numbers are limited, so they can't be dispatched easily.”

“That would be way too much, having such important steeds pulling our carriages!” I exclaimed. “This arrangement is already more than generous enough!”

Rion nodded in agreement. “These seem like well-trained warhorses. They're all happy and know how to listen.”

“Thank you for saying so.” Cliff looked as happy as if she had praised him personally. In all likelihood, he and his subordinates had trained the horses.

Considering that praise is coming from Rion, who’s so good at communicating with others that she can speak with animals, I’m sure these really are wonderful horses. That said, do your best so that we can arrive quickly, horseys. Please and thank you.

Since I had time, I decided to review what I knew about the Holy Empire of Deramis. It was a country founded by the Holy Order of Rinne, the world’s largest organized religion. In a broad sense, the Holy Order of Knights led by Captain Cliff fell under the umbrella of Rinne as well. The capital of the country—also called Deramis—was the holy ground of the religion that worshipped Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation. This was also the location where the Oracles of Deramis had, throughout history, been summoning Heroes to protect the world whenever a Demon Lord appeared. At the top of the pecking order was the pope, under which were the cardinals, archbishops, and other ranks in a hierarchy that sounded quite similar to the peerage system in other countries. As the Oracle, Colette was in a special position outside of this system, possessing power second only to that of the pope. In other words, she was somewhere between pope and cardinal. As for Captain Cliff...I wasn’t quite sure.

“Excuse me, Captain Cliff. I have a question. Do the holy knights possess some sort of title? Like ‘bishop,’ for example?”

“Those of us in the Holy Order of Knights are awarded statuses separate from those of the clergy. But to make it easier to understand, I, as knight captain, possess similar authority to that of an archbishop.”

“I see.” *Maybe it’s like the difference between military officers and civil officials. I guess even this holy land is a bit more complicated within.*

“Dearest brother, canst thou readeth me a book?”

Shutola, what happened to your manner of speech? You don’t have to force it, you know? Letting people see you at your worst isn’t shameful. Your close friend Colette said so.

“Ah! Me too, me too!”

Rion also grabbed a book from Clotho’s Storage and joined Shutola in climbing onto my lap like it was the most natural thing to do. *Thank god Gerard isn’t riding with us. Also, stop looking my way so enviously, Sera. It’ll make things even more weird for you to join now!*

“Sure, sure. We do have a lot of time. Okay, what am I reading today?”

The two thrust their respective books at me.

“*Contemporary Artistic Masterpieces from the Western Continent*, please!”

“The Study of Regal Principle for Royalty!”

“Sorry, um, do you guys have any picture books?”

I guess having excessively talented little sisters comes with its own challenges.



If I had to describe the city of Deramis in just one word, I would choose “white.” The walls that protected the city were white. The buildings, whether homes, places of business, or anything else, were white. Even the pavement was white. Everything in the capital was characterized by immaculate whiteness. Consequently, the few splashes of color, such as the green from trees and blue from fountains, seemed all the more vivid. There was just one exception: a giant palace that towered over the center of the city in a dazzling silver.

“Is this your party’s first time in Deramis, Kelvin-san?” Cliff asked.

“It is.” I nodded. “I’m feeling very surprised right now. It’s...very white.”

“Since long ago, we’ve used a special kind of stone that amplifies the effects of magic. That’s the building material for all the structures and pavement you see. This far away, you can barely feel the effects, but the closer you get to the center, the more powerful it becomes.”

A material that amplifies the effects of magic? Analyze Eye is only telling me that this is some kind of stone. The effect of a single brick is almost negligible, but as the saying goes, many a little makes a mickle. If one isn’t enough, gather more until it is. This stone looks pretty sturdy too, which means it serves well enough as building material. The city was probably built a long time ago, but the effect still seems to be going strong. These bricks are probably a form of Magical Jewels that possess a power that’s practically semipermanent due to its output being so minuscule.

“Is that silver building where the power of these bricks is most concentrated?” I asked.

“What wonderful discernment skills. That right there is the heart of both Deramis as a country and Rinne as a religion, the place where Colette-sama is praying earnestly even now: the Great Cathedral of Deramis! Or at least, that’s the line we always give tourists. Truth is, at this time, the Cathedral is overflowing with believers, so someone else is standing in for Colette-sama. She herself should be at her desk fighting a mountain of paperwork.”

“Ah, well, it *would* be dangerous, after all.”

So it’s basically a body double. She is the only one in this world capable of summoning the Heroes, so it makes sense that she can’t just show up in front of the believers so carelessly. What’s the meaning of the building being covered in silver, though? I’m still too far away to use

Analyze Eye on it.

::The white stone used to build the city possesses the power to amplify magic, but the silver used to build the Great Cathedral possesses the power to concentrate that effect. That's why the effect becomes stronger the closer you get. This is a setup to help the Oracles through the ages summon the most talented Heroes possible.::

Ah, I see. I mulled over the impromptu lesson from Melfina-sensei. I guess that's to be expected of a place that's produced countless Heroes throughout history. Wait a moment... So this is the place where Touya and the rest suddenly found themselves? They must have been really confused, just like I was, though I also lost my memories in the process.

"Um, Kel-nii..."

"I know. Don't say it."

Our carriage was currently clattering down the streets of Deramis, but we were completely on tenterhooks. Why? Because...

"Say, Kelvin, why do you think everyone's looking our way? Should I wave my hand?"

"Stop it."

Every single person we passed was dropping to their knees to worship us like mad. As in, they were prostrating themselves right there on the streets. *Don't tell me—was Melfina's identity leaked?!*

"This carriage is normally used by cardinals or the pope," Cliff explained. "And in Deramis, the higher someone's status, the holier they are considered. When believers see this carriage heading towards the Great Cathedral in line with others, they cannot help but stop and worship. This might seem somewhat strange to you, but please bear with it until we reach the palace. We're almost there."

If it's someone holy they're looking for, I do have a saint currently on my lap. But still, this country is turning out to be a lot more...unique than expected. If things are already this intense from the moment we enter the city, I worry what the future's going to bring.

"We'll be entering the palace from the back. There should be no pilgrims on that side."

Captain Cliff continued leading us forward, none the wiser about my apprehension.



It took quite a while for our carriage to reach the Palace of Deramis from the city gates. Watching the view from my seat, I fully understood just how large and expansive the city was. As Sera gazed tirelessly with sparkling eyes, our carriage climbed a slope and stopped in front of the massive palace. And there, beyond the palace complex that surrounded it, was the Great Cathedral before my eyes, throwing back the light of the sun in silver glory.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone,” Captain Cliff said as he opened our doors. “We are here.”

“Thank *you* for the escort,” I replied, doing my best to smile at the knights as I stepped out. Remaining seated for such a long time had been tiring, true, but my exhaustion was mainly mental. I had no idea whether I was forming the smile properly or not.

As Cliff had said on the way over, there were no layman believers anywhere in sight. There was, however, a group of clergy members waiting in a line, wearing very fancy outfits that boasted their high status. There were five of them of varying ages and genders. Their attire was mainly white, with each person holding a crosier in one hand. The only noticeable deviations were their stoles, which were a colorful range of red, blue, green, yellow, and purple.

Cliff leaned in to whisper in my ear, “These are the cardinals of Deramis. It’s extremely rare to see all of them together at once, but they insisted on being here to welcome you.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa, the cardinals are the second-highest-ranking people in this country aside from Colette, right?! Why are such high-level citizens here to greet us? Time to put Nerves of Steel to the test again. Plus, I also should warn everyone through the Network to be on their best behavior and have their guard up.

The man in the red stole stepped forward. “Kelvin-sama and company, we welcome you to Deramis. I am Marcel Gottes. It is a true honor to meet the person who defeated the Demon Lord alongside the Heroes and is the honorable recipient of both the Pope Medal and the Saint Medal.”

His white hair seemed to indicate that he was the oldest of the cardinals. The way he smiled so disarmingly put me on guard. *Am I just a distrustful person? Or this might be a lingering effect from what happened with Riold. Actually, yeah, the latter seems a lot more likely.*

The four other cardinals then introduced themselves in a ceremonious fashion, and we responded as best we could. My first impression was that they seemed secretive and performative, cutting a sharp contrast with Gaun, where the people approached every situation head-on. Of course, not all of the cardinals seemed that way, and I wasn’t sure how wise it was to be like Colette and *overly* expose one’s thoughts, but the general feeling I got was that this country did not suit me. These people reminded me too much of other countries’ nobles with their faction struggles, and I wanted no part of that world.

“The Oracle awaits. Please follow me.”

The man in the green stole, the only one my instincts told me I could trust, gestured towards the door to the palace. He appeared to be the youngest of the cardinals, but that still put him somewhere in his thirties. He had introduced himself as Sai Dill.

He started walking, indicating that we were to follow. Several holy knights accompanied us, but the other cardinals merely smiled and saw us off.

Honestly, I've had enough of them. Let's go see Colette.

::Honey, keep it together! You must stay strong!::

You meant that for yourself, right? The shaking in Melfina's voice was audible even through the Network. Come on, Colette's not that bad. I'm sure we can get used to her someday! Ha ha ha...ha ha...ha...



We soon found ourselves in a very spacious drawing room. Here, too, everything was white, reminding me of a hospital room.

“Everyone, it has been far too long. I have been awaiting this day with bated breath.”

Both Mel and I barely bit back the “Who the hell are you?!” that rose unbidden to our lips. As expected, Colette was waiting for us, but on her face was the smile of a saint, seeming so pure and divine that it almost matched Melfina's smile as a goddess.

That's strange. That's really strange! I'd braced myself for a hyper Colette breathing so hard we could practically hear her heartbeat. This is so anticlimactic that it's actually shocking.

“What's the matter, Kelvin-sama?”

“Huh? Oh, it's nothing. I'm glad to see you're doing great, Colette.”

“Th-That's right,” Mel managed. “Health is the most important thing.”

Colette smiled again. “Your concern warms my heart.”

I immediately called an emergency high-speed meeting on the Network. That was how serious the situation was.

What are the chances of this being an impostor?

::I'm...pretty sure this is Colette. Honey, didn't you check with Analyze Eye?::

I did, but there's still a chance she's someone using Disguise. Ange, is there anyone among the Apostles who might be capable of impersonating Colette?

::I mean, that kinda was my area of expertise, so I don't think there was anyone who was better than me. And I'm not confident I could perfectly pull off being the Oracle of Deramis. Even I know to choose my jobs!::

I...see... I was surprised to hear the former Apostle throw in the towel. So this Colette is the real deal?!

::Kel-nii, Mel-nee, and An-nee, you're all being really rude! Even Colette can behave when she needs to!::

::I-I suppose Rion does have a point. Honey, let's take this as an

indication that Colette's sickness can be cured. It's important to view things in a positive light.:

Rion, you do realize you were implying that if the situation were different, Colette would be out of control, right?

At the same time, Shutola was pumping Colette's hands up and down. "Colette-chan, it's been so long!"

"I'm glad to see you lively and well too," Colette replied, giggling elegantly. It was a truly heartwarming scene of two long-separated friends rejoicing at their reunion.

So, Colette's grown up and learned how to hold herself back. I'm sorry. I was the sinner. Before I knew it, all of my companions were smiling at the sight.

"Cardinal Sai," Colette said, "thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to guide my guests."

"No, thank *you* for the opportunity, Oracle. It is an incredible honor being able to meet the champions of our age in person. If there is nothing else, I will take my leave now. May the goddess bless you."

The dark-haired, dark-skinned man—a rare sight in this country of mostly fair-skinned people—left the room along with the knights who had joined us...perhaps out of consideration for Colette and me. The cardinal had remained gentlemanly until the end, not stepping in more than necessary and allowing us our distance. Now, the only ones left in the drawing room were my party, Colette, and Captain Cliff.

"Cardinal Sai used to be a holy knight," Colette told us. "When he said he wished to meet you, Kelvin-sama, it must have been that part of him speaking."

"It was thanks to him yielding the seat of knight captain that the position is now mine," Cliff added. "I confess, there is a part of me that regrets not having insisted on winning it in fair combat. After all, the title of 'strongest fighter in Deramis' was on the line."

"Ahh, no wonder." *So he's a powerful fighter who's confident in his skills. That explains why I unconsciously took a liking to him.*

Once the small talk was out of the way, Mel broached the main topic. "Colette, we have come because there is something we need to consult you about."

"Consult me?" Surprise flitted across the Oracle's face but was quickly replaced by seriousness. "Mel-sama, may Captain Cliff sit in on this?"

Colette's words implied that Cliff could be trusted. Since she was the one vouching for him, I figured it was fine. I asked Sera and Ange to confirm there were no suspicious presences nearby and, with Colette's permission, cast Silent Whisper to soundproof the room.

"The truth is..." When all the preparations were done, Mel proceeded to tell Colette and Cliff everything about Elearis, the

Apostles, and their aim. The two cried out in surprise several times during her recap but otherwise listened attentively.

“To think such an organization exists and that they were the ones behind the Trycenian war and the incident at the Beast King Festival...” Colette murmured. “This is a grave situation indeed.”

“I’m afraid the scope is far too great for me to wrap my mind around,” Cliff admitted. “Kelvin-san, I don’t mean to sound doubtful, but are you sure of this?”

“Ange here also used to be an Apostle. A lot’s happened since, though, and she’s on our side now, so don’t worry.”

“Um, my name is Ange. Feel free to ask—”

“Oh my!” Colette blurted out. “You’ve already opened the eyes of a member of that evil organization! I expected no less from my beloved and much-adored Mel-sama and Kelvin-sama— Ahem.”

I didn’t see or hear anything. What fine weather we’re having today. There’s nothing to be scared of, Ange. Come look outside the window with me.

“The last Oracle who served Melfina-sama’s predecessor, Elearis-sama, would have been my ancestor, Iris Deramilius. However, she’s —”

“Oracle, that matter is highly classified information.”

“No secret of our country should ever be held back from Melfina-sama, our Lady and Goddess. However, it is true that it might be better for them to hear this from my father directly.”

“And your father is the pope?” I asked hesitantly.

Colette nodded. “That is correct.”

Which means we’ll get an audience with the monarch of Deramis. I’ve never seen him before... Colette came in his place during my promotion ceremony and there was no opportunity for him to show himself during the Trycenian war. Thinking about it now, I don’t even know his name.

“Due to private reasons, Pope Philip Deramilius never shows himself, even to the believers,” Colette explained. “On the very limited occasions when he truly has to show up, he stays behind a curtain. The only people allowed to meet him in person are his attendants, Cliff, Cardinal Sai, and me. Not even the other cardinals are granted that privilege.”

“May I ask why?” I inquired.

“I believe it will be obvious when you see him. Captain Cliff, make arrangements for the audience.”

“Yes, Oracle! Immediately!”

With a sharp salute, Cliff left the room. We passed the time chatting about Riold’s teleportation gate authorization and a variety of other topics until Colette suddenly cupped one ear with a hand.

“I see... Yes... Very well. Then...”

Oh, right, Colette and Captain Cliff are connected telepathically too. Is he contacting her now?

“Everyone, the pope has given his permission for an audience. I’m very sorry to ask you to move again when you’ve only just settled in, but please follow me to where His Holiness is.”



Colette guided us deeper and deeper into the palace, climbing staircase after staircase. A while later, we found ourselves on the top floor. There were no soldiers or knights standing guard, only stone sculptures of varying sizes plus several attendants, although I only needed a quick look to tell that those attendants were hardly normal servants. They were all at least as powerful as a holy knight.

At the end of a maze of passages that I would definitely have gotten lost in was a giant door flanked by two huge statues of what looked like a cross between a dragon and an angel. Colette stopped and turned around.

“The pope is beyond this door. Are you all ready?”

I nodded. “Any time.”

“Understood.” Colette knocked. “Your Holiness, I’ve brought Kelvin-sama and his party.”

“Mm, come in.”

So young? The voice that I heard from behind the door was that of a young man—no, that of a teenage boy. I did not have time to dwell on it, however, as the door opened smoothly.

“Hey there! ‘Nice to meet you’ for everyone aside from Melfina-sama, I suppose? I’m Philip Deramilius, the Pope of the Holy Empire of Deramis.”

Sitting on the throne before a massive statue of an angel was a boy younger than Rion with silver hair and exquisite features.





"I see, so you're saying that Iris is behind everything that's happened..."

"This is an enormous crisis, Your Holiness!"

"Aw, c'mon, Colette, why can't you call me 'father' here? It's not like there's anyone you have to keep up appearances for!"

"Your Holiness, Melfina-sama is present!"

The boy chortled upon being told off by Colette.

What's going on? Aren't we here to meet the man with the most power in all of Deramis? Why do I only see the scene of an older sister scolding her younger brother for having pulled off a prank?

::Honey, I understand your doubt, but I assure you that boy over there is the real Pope Philip.::

Really? So my eyes aren't fooling me. There've been too many occasions for me to doubt my own senses today.

"Philip, Colette, have you had enough father-daughter bonding time yet?"

"Oh no! I'm terribly sorry, Melfina-sama!"

"Yep, yep, that's about enough. I'm sorry for my klutz of a daughter, Melfina-sama."

Pope Philip's casual air was a sharp contrast to Colette's constant bowing and apologizing. Their reactions being so different left us at a loss for how to respond.

"Well, let's start again: I'm Philip Deramilius. I may look like a child, but I assure you that I am the Pope of Deramis. Just so we're clear, my appearance is a big secret."

The pope placed a finger to his mouth with a cheeky grin. He was wearing the same style of clothes as the cardinals, except the stole over his shoulders was a dazzling silver. That dazzle, when combined with his exquisite features, seemed to make him appear even holier. Still, if he was truly Colette's father, that led to certain other conclusions. For example...

"Excuse me," I said, "and please let me know if I'm wrong, but has Your Holiness Evolved?"

"Oh? You're a sharp one."

Ah, I got it right straight off? Analyze Eye is being blocked by Rank S Concealment, so I can't read his Status. Now that I also know about Disguise, I guess Analyze Eye isn't going to be all that useful when dealing with the people and beings that I'm meeting these days.

"Well, to make sure that we start off on the same page, I'll tell you more about me. To come right out with it, Iris is my little sister."

"Huh?!" We all widened our eyes like deer in headlights.

Give me a moment. Wait, hold on, hold on. Did he just say that Iris, the one leading the Apostles, is his little sister? That makes him her older brother, right? And Iris was alive long, long, loooooong ago, right? We're talking all the way back when Sera's father, Demon Lord Gustav, fought the Hero Serge Flore. That's even further in the past than the Great War that plunged the Eastern Continent into chaos. Doing the math, that'd make Philip...about as old as Viktor, I guess? I seem to remember that demon being six hundred or seven hundred years old. Oh, damn...

"Um, just how old are you, Your Holiness?"

"I've honestly lived so long, I've stopped keeping count, ha ha ha." *Please look at your Status right now!*

Philip continued, "You know about the Hero who came before Touya and the others, right? Serge? I'm sure you do. Based on what you just shared, Serge is also in that organization of Apostles. The truth is, my sister, Iris, was the Oracle who summoned Serge, and I was a member of the party Serge formed. She had such pretty black hair that I fell for her. But—and listen to this!—every other member in her party was so handsome that it was just ridiculous! There was the wandering elf, right? The prince of a fallen country. Me. A holy knight. But Serge was so slow on the uptake! In the end, she never got together with any of us and just went back to her world!"

So Pope Philip was a member of the Hero's party! We're in luck. He just might have the info we need. But still, what a harem. Sounds like Serge lived that protagonist life, all right. The way Philip cheekily slipped himself into that list of "handsome party members" tells me a lot about his personality.

Sensing the brief glare Sera gave Philip, I said telepathically, *Sera, I'm sure I don't have to tell you, but—*

::Don't worry. I've come to terms with everything that happened.:: All right.

I was pretty sure it was only Melfina that Sera had forgiven completely, but after being with her for so long, I knew Sera could control herself. I had faith in her.

"Your Holiness, you included a few unnecessary facts just now."

"C'mon, call me 'father'! Colette, you have to live life to the utmost or your heart will grow old— Ah, I guess this isn't something you have any problem doing. But you see, your father is worried about whether you'll be able to have any children the way you are."

"I have Melfina-sama, Kelvin-sama, and Rion-sama. They're all I need!"

"I knew you'd say that. You do— Wait, what?"

"You two, let's bring the conversation back on track." Once again, Melfina had to interrupt the father and daughter pair.

I can't just let the misunderstanding go, but still, it's pretty rare to see

Melfina being the one trying to keep a conversation on track.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s just been so long since I got to talk with someone other than Colette and Sai. Can’t help getting a bit excited. Okay, let’s return to the topic. Just as Kelvin-kun suspected, when I defeated Gustav alongside Serge, I Evolved into a saint. Um, do you know about how Evolving prolongs your life span?”

“Yes, Beast King Leonhart told me about it.”

“Oh wow, *that* Beast King? He must’ve really taken a liking to you, Kelvin-kun. So yep, I turned into a saint, and my appearance hasn’t really changed since then. And I’ve been alive all this time.”

So Pope Philip is a saint, just like Rion. I’m pretty interested in what happened to his companions from back then, especially the elf and the prince.

“Are your party members still out there somewhere?”

“Unfortunately, not all of us Evolved at the time. The elf, who originally had the longest life span, passed away from old age. The holy knight went to fight a Rank S monster, and...well, not everything goes the way you want in life.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for bringing it up—”

“No, no, it’s fine. Just take it as a lesson from your forebears to be careful. And I still have someone with me.”

“Which would be...?”

The pope clapped his hands as a signal with a bit of a smug look on his face. Immediately, someone approached on the other side of the door we had entered from.

Wait, this presence—

“Pardon my entrance.”

“Cardinal Sai?” I turned around and stared at the man we had just parted with.

“That’s right!” Philip chortled like a kid who had successfully pulled off a prank. “Cardinal Sai is the prince of a fallen country. Just like me, he was one of Serge’s companions.”



“Phew...”

“Well done out there today, honey. Here you go.”

“Ah, thanks.”

I accepted the cup that Melfina was holding out and gulped down the wonderfully chilled water with relish.

“Today was one surprise after another. Did you know all this stuff ahead of time, Mel?”

“More or less, though there is a difference between what I know and what I can say.”

“Right, the limitations placed on your artificial body.”

I gestured for Melfina to sit next to me on the bed. Everything that had happened today had left me exhausted, what with being worshipped when entering the city, learning that the pope and one of the cardinals had actually been party members with the previous Hero, and everything in between. Our other companions were currently resting up in the guest rooms that had been made up for us in the palace.

"In the end, I guess the key is the moment you succeeded Elearis," I noted.

I still had no idea why the position had been passed on. Melfina could not tell us due to the limitations placed on her artificial body, and Pope Philip wasn't sure about the details, only generally aware that there had been a change in personnel among the deities.

However, that was not the case for the Oracle of the time, Iris. She had fiercely insisted that she would only ever worship Elearis and raised a rebel faction of those faithful to the goddess, causing a schism within the Holy Order of Rinne.

Philip had said, "The two things I didn't know were that Serge and Iris are still alive. I'm very confused about Serge still being here, since she was supposed to have returned to her own world. If memory serves, Iris died soon after sending Serge back. Specifically, she was executed for spurring those faithful to Elearis-sama to rise up. The record of what happened back then remains highly classified information to this day."

In other words, even though Rinne is well-known for its faith in Melfina, things aren't quite so black and white under the hood. Philip did mention that rebellious remnants are rumored to still exist and are in hiding.

"I wonder what it was that Elearis wanted to achieve, even going so far as to manipulate Iris, someone who had placed so much faith in her..."

Silence was all I got in reply, but I was not surprised. The only way to get my answer was to Summon Melfina in her actual body or to ask Elearis in person.

I shrugged. "At the very least, I want to ensure that Colette doesn't walk the same path Iris did."

"That I agree with!"

Colette's a good girl at heart. I don't want to be the cause of her taking a wrong turn in life. I swear that I'll do my best to—

"Haa, haa, haa...a room filled with Mel-sama's and Kelvin-sama's sublime fragrances... I can smell it fresh and clear even through the keyhole. Ohhhh, the sweet and sublime aroma courses through my body from head to toe! Ahh, I've held myself back for so long, my restraint is on the verge of breaking down. I've already sent everyone

away, so I can indulge myself just a little bit, right? Just a tiny bit? I can allow myself to partake of this holy fragrance for the briefest of moments—”

My ears, which had become very sensitive after my Evolution, picked up something that I absolutely did not need to hear.

She is a good girl at heart, but I guess there's no denying she's a weirdo.



The streets of Deramis were blinding no matter where I looked, an impression that could largely be chalked up to all the structures being so white. Even the citizens of the city wore the color, making my party's generally black aesthetic stand out all the more.

They sure are taking this color scheme seriously.

“I'm gonna need a bit of time to gather information and do that thing you asked,” Philip had said. “In the meantime, how about doing some sightseeing? Oh, want me to give you recommendations for nightlife places? Are there any themes that you prefer?”

We had found ourselves with free time on our hands. As we were being treated as guests, we were asked to stay within the city and not leave without reason. That said, Deramis was an absolutely massive capital. We had already had our fill of sightseeing in Gaun, but this new place triggered a curiosity in us. As a result, I was currently out on a walk with Melfina, Shutola, and Colette.

Colette was with us because the pope had, in a show of goodwill, lent her to us as a guide. However, since there were very few as well-known and as “holy” as her in Deramis, she was currently wearing a deep-hooded cloak similar to what I always wore.

My other companions were currently out on the town. Efil and Rion had gone to buy daily necessities; Gerard, Sera, and Dahak had split up to chase whatever caught their fancy; and Ange was out gathering information for me. I had expected Rion to express interest in coming with my group, but she'd said she didn't want to get in the way of Shutola and Colette rekindling their friendship. I was so touched by how considerate she was that I had to exercise an iron will to stop myself from rubbing my cheek against hers right there on the spot.

“This place really is huge...”

“This is the largest city on the Eastern Continent. The circumference is so lengthy that it's impossible to walk it in a day.”

“Damn...”

“Don't be overwhelmed, dearest brother!”

Shutola, who was riding on my back, was practically a bundle of energy. *Well, she doesn't have to walk, so little wonder she's got so much*

energy.

Colette giggled. "I see that you've gotten used to being Shutola-chan's big brother, Kelvin-sama."

Her beaming smile showed no hint of her creepy outburst from earlier. Was it because she'd had her fill then, or had I suffered an auditory hallucination? I mean, it was most likely the former, but it was better for both parties if I didn't think too much about it. At least, that was the conclusion I had arrived at after running Parallel Processing. It's important to let things go.

"Om... Mmmmm!"

"Eat as much as you like, Mel-sama."

With her Oracle enabling her, Melfina had completely lost herself to eating. Although my wallet was spared the burden, I was somewhat worried about whether the sight of their target of worship acting in such a way would detract from the believers' reverence. Then again, the person spurring Mel on seemed to be having the time of her life, so I supposed it was fine. Things had yet to get out of hand. *Yet.*

"Would you like one as well, Kelvin-sama? Here's yours, Shutola-chan."

"Thank you, Colette-chan."

"Give my portion to Mel. She probably hasn't had enough yet. Right, Mel?"

"Oh, honey!"

"Wh-What a dazzling display of love between husband and wife! This must be recorded in the scriptures for posterity—"

"Colette, stop."

I hurriedly clapped a hand over her mouth. *What exactly are you trying to leave behind for posterity?! I just said things had yet to get out of hand; why are you immediately trying to prove me wrong?!*

"A whole group of people are approaching us," Shutola noted.

I looked up. "Huh, you're right."

In front of us was a large group of what looked like priests walking and praying. Unfortunately, we were in a residential area, so the streets here weren't as wide. At the current rate, we were going to bump into them.

"They're pilgrims," Colette explained. "I very much appreciate seeing those who are eager about their faith, but if they were to see my face, things would get troublesome. Let's head this way." She walked into one of the side streets, so we followed.

"At the other end of this path"—Shutola paused as if trying to recall something—"is the orphanage, right?"

"That is correct," Colette confirmed. "Very few people pass that way, and it wouldn't cause as much of a fuss for my face to be seen there. We can stop to rest there for a while."

“Uh, Shutola, don’t tell me you’ve already memorized the map of this incredibly huge city?”

“I memorized it long ago. When I had to come for a dinner party, I looked it up while looking up everything else.”

So, this is information from her past. Still, normal people wouldn’t remember something like that. It’s like me being able to fully recite a dictionary page that I randomly flipped to in my childhood. I’ve already learned how important it is to ensure that I lock my door at night, but now I have to be doubly careful not to do anything strange where Shutola can see. Perfect Memory is one scary skill indeed.



“Sister Marigan, it’s been a while.”

“Oh my, if it isn’t the Oracle! It truly has been a while!”

“Come on, don’t call me that. Please call me by my name like you used to!”

Colette’s conversation with the elderly director of the orphanage went incredibly smoothly. They immediately shifted into happily exchanging stories of the past, indicating that they knew each other from a long time back.

The orphanage was a facility that had been attached to a Rinne church. It was there to take in children who had lost their parents from any number of causes. There were a total of sixteen children but only three nuns—including the old Sister Marigan—to take care of them all. Furthermore, the little ones were far naughtier and more energetic than the young ones in my own house.

Even now, a nun wearing glasses was being played around with by a whole gaggle of kids in the front yard. She appeared to be the same age as me. And she had huge knockers—they were so huge, I could tell even beneath her habit. *Ah, a bratty kid just grabbed them. She looks troubled. This is scandalous. Truly scan—*



“Kelvin-sama, this is Sister Marigan, who runs this orphanage. She’s given us her permission to stay a while.”

“The Oracle has explained everything to me. Who’d have thought a Rank S adventurer would come to a place like this! Ah, you probably shouldn’t tell the children, though. Otherwise, they’ll make a fuss and you’ll find yourself in the same situation that Sister Ria is in over there.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Thank you for the warning. I’ll be careful.”

“Please, come on inside. I’ll serve you something cold to drink.”

“Oh, please, I wouldn’t want to impose.”

Just as I was about to walk into the church, I caught Shutola looking at the children. Mel, who was following behind me, noticed too.

“Shutola, do you want to play with the kids?” Mel asked kindly.

“Huh? B-But...” Shutola’s grip on my back tightened.

Ah, is her prior shyness acting up again? I guess she’s still not as confident about interacting with kids her age.

“Honey, let me borrow Shutola for a while.” Melfina gently lifted the girl from my back, eliciting a small scream of surprise.

I whirled around. “What? Uh, wait—”

Melfina set Shutola down on the ground, then held her hand. “I’ll go with you! I suddenly feel like playing too!”

She promptly began charging towards the group of children, dragging the little princess along despite her squeals of protest.

“Whyyyy?!” Sister Ria wailed, equally surprised by the burst of movement.

Seeing as Shutola’s always just following Rion and Ruka, the way Mel handled it just now is probably the best answer.

“Mel-sama and Shutola-chan holding hands and dancing around?! What’s more, she’s even showing her holy visage to the children! Mel-sama’s love is truly deep and wide without measure, pure and noble and beyond absolute perfection! No, no, Colette. Even though Mel-sama and Kelvin-sama tell you they don’t mind, this is a place of learning and a house of the Goddess! I mustn’t go beyond having a nosebleed—”

“No nosebleed either.” I landed a knifehand chop on the head of the Oracle who was peeking out from behind the doors of the church. I couldn’t very well ignore her when she was literally right there in front of me.

“Owie!” Colette yelped, then gasped. “Huh? What was I...”

“Your chronic condition was acting up, that’s all. Come on, let’s head inside.”

“Yes, Kelvin-sama!”

Phew. I hope Shutola didn't see that. Wait, hold on, am I getting used to dealing with Colette's outbursts?



I soon found myself in a reception room in the church. Although the tea that was served was by no means expensive, it was still delicious and calmed me down. The time passed with Colette, Sister Marigan, and me making small talk, and soon, Melfina and Shutola rejoined us. I noticed their clothes were covered with dust and dirt, so I cast Clean on them.

"I'm so tired," Shutola groaned.

Oh? Was that a bit too much exercise for a girl who grew up in a palace?

::She had to really hold back while playing tag with the children. You know, her usual playmates are Rion and Ruka, and the difference in level is a bit....::

Ah, I see.

I looked at Shutola. *So she's not physically but rather mentally exhausted from having to be careful all that time while dealing with normal children. But she does also look pretty satisfied. Conditions aside, I guess she enjoys playing with kids her age after all.*

I was roused from my thoughts as the nun with the glasses from earlier knocked on the door and walked in. She was accompanied by a slightly shorter nun who looked younger than her.

"Um, thank you very much for playing with the kids!" the former cried, sounding extremely flustered. Just as when she was handling the children, she seemed rather nervous and overcome when speaking to us.

"Accept my thanks too," the other nun said, stepping forward. "Sister Ria here is still an apprentice, you see. And as you can tell, she's a klutz and quite slow with things, so she's having a tough time of it."

Although her stature and face gave the impression that she was the younger of the two, her confident bearing made it clear that she was the one with more experience.

"And I've told you many times to mind your speech, Sister Atra," Sister Marigan said chidingly.

"Ah, that ain't happening. Don't worry, I'm sure Melfina-sama won't get her knickers tied up over something so trivial!"

The old woman sighed and shook her head in resignation.

And there you have it. Is your believer right or is she taking your name in vain, Goddess Melfina?

::People are free to choose how they speak and live their lives. I'm not here to dictate such matters. These are rules set by the leaders of

the religious order rather than by me.::

Fair enough. Then again, I do see how a nun who gets too out of hand would give Deramis a bad reputation. It's like how a school gets bashed online for just one student who did something bad enough to attract outside attention.

Colette spoke up. "Sister Marigan, there's no need to be so harsh on her for—"

"Hey, you get it— WHOA! You're the Oracle! That's rad! May I shake your hand?!"

"Of course. I'd be delighted."

"Atra, that's enough. Introduce yourself already!" Marigan grabbed the hand that Atra was extending and pushed it back down.

Ah, I guess Colette is truly respected by the believers. And I did notice Ria at the back looking conflicted about whether to stop Atra or not. Maybe she's just shy.

Atra clicked her tongue. "Aw, I was so close. Well, I'm Atra! This church picked me up when I was young, and I've worked my way up to being a nun. Now I'm also in charge of teaching Ria. Nice ta meetcha!"

"I-I'm Ria. I'm still, uh, an apprentice, but n-nice to meet you..."

What an odd pair. They seem like such extreme opposites, both in personality and in...the size of their assets.

"All right, it's about time for you to return to the children, Sister Atra," Marigan said. "It's time for their lessons, is it not?"

"Aw, but the Oracle's here! That's—"

"Sister Atra." Marigan smiled a smile that made even me sit up straight.

"Yes, ma'am! I'm heading beck now!" Atra dashed off towards the orphanage at top speed, flubbing her words in alarm.

"Back," right? Heading "back." It almost seems like she has a past trauma that was just triggered.

"I'm glad to see this place is as lively as always."

"All thanks to you coming incognito and helping us out back in the day, Oracle. Funnily enough, I don't think Atra ever figured that out."

"Oh, it's all right. If what I did was helpful in the slightest, that's enough to make me happy."

"Oh, bless you, Oracle."

The conversation between Colette and Sister Marigan was raising so many questions in my mind, but the two were clearly having a moment, with the old lady feeling so touched that she was even quivering. As for Melfina...she was entirely occupied with the cookies that had been served alongside the tea. *Little wonder she's been so quiet.*

"Hm? Sister Ria, what's that signboard over there?" Shutola, who

had grown bored with the conversation and was idly swinging her legs off the edge of her chair, suddenly pointed to a long, oblong placard propped up against one of the walls. It was so old that some of the text on its surface was faded and no longer legible.

"Right!" Ria replied nervously. "That's the, uh, the signboard used by this orphanage before its, um, renovation. The wooden building was said to be a, uh, hazard because it was right next to the church and it was so old. If, um, I remember right, that's also when we changed the name of this place?"

"We couldn't exactly throw it away," Marigan added, "so that's why we're keeping it here. This isn't something to leave in a reception room, but this church is quite tucked away and we get very few visitors. Still, I'm glad you're taking your studies seriously, Ria."

"Oh, I...thank you very much!" Sister Ria blushed as red as a tomato.

Ah, she's the kind of person who doesn't know how to handle being praised. Hmm, let's continue this topic a little longer.

"That sounds very interesting," I said. "By the way, what's the name of the orphanage now?"

"Oh, uh, this is Lifil Orphanage," Ria replied. "But...our name didn't change all that much. Um, the previous one was, um..."

Shutola perked up. "Huh? Was it maybe *Lifril* Orphanage?"

"Oh, you sure are knowledgeable. All we did was make the name a little easier to pronounce, but we did also take the opportunity to get ourselves a new sign out front. It was around that time I became director of this place."

"Really?! So this is where Lunoir and Ashley grew up!"

Lunoir? Ashley? Uh...who're they?

I didn't recognize the names, but they clearly rang a bell for Marigan. Her eyes widened with surprise. "You know them?"

Shutola nodded. "Mm-hm! They're my friends!"

"I...see. Through their letters, I know that after they left this orphanage, they entered government service in Trycen, then joined a knight order. However, I stopped hearing from them all of a sudden two years ago. I was really worried about them. Are they doing well?"

"I'm sorry. Actually, I haven't heard from them in the last two years either..."

"Oh dear. I wonder what they might be up to."

The two became dejected all of a sudden. *I've no idea who they're talking about, but I guess the people in question have been missing for quite a while? Hold on, why does Colette have such a serious look on her face too? Does she know what's going on? This doesn't seem like the right atmosphere to ask the other two, so let's try Colette.*

"Colette, you know who they're talking about?"

“Do you not, Kelvin-sama? Oh, that’s right. Come to think of it, I’ve never told you.”

Uh, I’m glad the dots connected in your head, but please tell me.

“Lunoir-san and Ashley-san are, well...” Colette moved closer to whisper into my ear. “Those are Sylvia-san’s and Ema-san’s real names.”

To sum up Colette’s explanation, this “Lunoir” and “Ashley” that Sister Marigan and Shutola were talking about were Sylvia and Ema, whom I had met at my promotion ceremony. Sylvia was Lunoir and Ema was Ashley.

Their story started when they had collapsed on the road and were picked up by a nun serving at the orphanage. Lunoir and Ashley were not related by blood. Neither of them knew who their parents were or had any idea where they were born. They were already relying on each other to survive in their earliest memories. Their clothes were in tatters, making them look like slaves on the run. That said, they did not have collars on their necks, and treating slaves in such a horrible manner was strictly forbidden in Deramis. In all likelihood, they were being transported by a slave merchant who meant to sell them in Deramis—they must have managed to escape somehow before the collars were put on.

It wasn’t Marigan who had picked them up, but the previous director. Then again, the title of director did not quite encompass who she was. Before she’d come, the church and orphanage were no more than abandoned ruins; let alone not having a director, it hadn’t even had a single staff member. This nun had repaired the rotten structures and started the place up all on her own.

It was a while down the road when Marigan heard about it and got involved. Eventually, the orphanage shaped up enough to gain official recognition from Deramis. According to Marigan, that former nun had taught—on top of basic reading and writing—knowledge and skills for getting by in life. Lunoir and Ashley looked up to and loved her like a sister.

By the time the orphanage had been properly developed, the two had grown old enough to leave. They headed to Trycen in hopes of entering government service and eventually ended up as the general and lieutenant general of the Magic Knight Order. The fact that they both possessed Blessings from dragon kings meant they had gone through quite a lot along the way, but even Colette wasn’t clear on the details.

Then, two years ago, these two decorated officers abruptly discarded their positions, changed their names, and became adventurers. According to what Sylvia had shared when she’d approached Colette for advice during the feast held after my

promotion ceremony, she and Ashley were staying on the down low because of what they were trying to do. They were looking for the nun who had established Lifil Orphanage—she had gone missing.

The story was fine up to this point, but there was simply too little information on the nun in question. Her name hadn't even been mentioned yet.

"What'd you tell Sylvia, Colette? In the first place, there'd be lots of rumors if a nun who founded such a well-established orphanage just up and disappeared, right?"

"You'd think so, but nothing of the sort occurred. When I started helping out here, it was already all fixed up and Sister Marigan was the director. The founder was gone, but I did not think much of it. I could only tell Sylvia-san that I did not have any information relevant to her search. When I returned to Deramis, I tried looking into it, but all the people who knew this nun well only told me that she was convalescing somewhere."

"Convalescing?"

"She was apparently afflicted by something. Even after she disappeared, she had kept in touch with Sylvia-san and Ema-san through a magic item that could send short, simple sentences. I did not ask Sylvia-san about the specific details of that correspondence, but apparently, it was two years ago when the founder stopped responding entirely. Sylvia-san said she has no idea what happened after that."

"Ah, so that's why the two of them quit the Magic Knight Order. By the way, did Sylvia tell you the name of this nun?"

"It's Ellen. Sister Ellen."

Hmm... Yeah, don't know that name. It doesn't make sense for Sylvia and Ema to be searching for this Sister Ellen so desperately if she really is just convalescing. Therefore, there's got to be another reason, something else that's convinced them they needed to take action. The only thing I can think of is the correspondence through the magic item. I really want to know what was written in the last exchange.

"Are you talking about Sister Ellen?" Sister Marigan asked, possibly having overheard what Colette was whispering to me.

I nodded. "Colette's just been telling me what a wonderful person Sister Ellen was but that she never had the honor of meeting her in person."

In a way, this is convenient. Maybe Sister Marigan knows something, since she has met Sister Ellen before.

"It's a pity indeed. The two just missed each other, sadly."

"What kind of person was Sister Ellen?"

"Hmm... She had incredible talent in both the literary arts and with the sword, and such stunning beauty that even I, as a woman,

could not help but fall for her. She was both strict and kind, and above all, filled with affection. Despite being somewhat sickly, she worked hard at teaching Lunoir and Ashley—the first two children this orphanage took in—sword and magic skills, respectively, and even switched it up at times. Perhaps she was just that good of a teacher or perhaps those two just had the talent all along. Either way, they grew by leaps and bounds and even made it into one of the knight orders in Trycen. Truly, their talent is undeniable. This is especially true of Lunoir, who has a wonderful appetite and makes everything she eats look absolutely delicious—”

The praise came out in an unending torrent, describing a flawless superhuman. For some reason, she had shifted into bragging about Sylvia and Ema halfway through, so I’m leaving that out. Part of me had expected it, but she didn’t possess the information we really needed.

And by the way, is it just me or does she seem really similar to Gerard in character?

“Honey, why’re you only talking with Colette?! That’s so unfair! Please give me some attention too!” Melfina tugged my sleeve.

I looked over. “I mean, you were completely fixated on those cookies just now.”

On Mel’s other side, I spotted a princess nibbling on a cookie like a squirrel.

“My oh my! What hearty appetites you two have! This sure reminds me of Lunoir...” A trickle of tears coursed down Sister Marigan’s face, but I decided not to comment on it.

The plate on the table had been entirely cleaned; not only were there no cookies left, there weren’t even powdered crumbs. In all likelihood, Mel had finished eating, gotten bored, gotten jealous of Colette and me talking, and wanted to join in. I’m pretty certain that was the course of events.

Mel, properly cleaning off a plate is a praiseworthy thing, but I’m pretty sure these snacks were meant for all of us. That said, good job making such a small amount of food last this long. You even gave Shutola a piece. You’re really growing!

Seeing our exchange, Sister Marigan asked, “Um, Kelvin-san and Mel-san, are you two in *that* kind of relationship?”

“Yes, we are,” Mel answered without missing a beat. “We haven’t been engaged yet, but we’re close enough to sleep together at night.”

“HUH?!” I nearly choked. *This is a church! A church! What sort of bombshell announcement is this goddess dropping in a place built to worship her?! And in the first place, you sleep in my bed like you’re the only one in it! Sleeping next to you is literally so dangerous that I gain proficiency in Danger Detection every time I do it!*

“That’s a pity. Here I was hoping that the Oracle who’s practically married herself to Melfina-sama finally found herself a partner in you, Kelvin-san. You’re the first man she’s ever brought over, and she’s even addressing you without honorifics.”

“Sister Marigan, these two are tightly tied by the bond of husband and wife,” Colette stated emphatically, “with no room for me to come between them. The only thing I would not yield is the claim of being the person who believes in them the most!”

“I also love my dearest brother and sisters!”

“Honey, let’s get started with the preparations for our wedding.”

“My oh my, what a sinful person you are!”

Everyone in the room seemed to be continuing the conversation while ignoring how flustered I was. Each new thing just made me more dumbfounded: Sister Marigan’s strange expectations, Shutola’s out-of-left-field response, Mel’s extremely earnest request—why is the goddess being the most brazen with her desires here?!—and whatever conclusion it was that Sister Marigan ended up making. My only saving grace was the muttered “Seriously?!” from the person peeking through the window from outside. *Thank you, Sister Atra.*

::Kelvin, can you hear me?::

Uh, oh, yeah, I guess. What’s the matter, Ange?

::Hmm? You sound kinda exhausted::

Ugh. A lot’s happened.

::Oh? Oh? Do you need your big sister to console you?!::

I have no idea what you’ve got in mind, but I may take you up on that offer. So, what’s this call for? Did your investigation turn something up?

::Yep, consider it a preliminary report. This info is still under wraps for now, but I’m pretty sure of its accuracy. Tomorrow, the Heroes are returning to Deramis::



Upon confirming that the groups of pilgrims had left the vicinity, we bade farewell to the nuns and headed to a large natural park in the middle of the city. As befitted such a massive city, the park was incredibly spacious.

“It’s my first time seeing your new doll, Shutola-chan. It’s so big I have to crane my head to look up at it. Is this the latest product from Trycen?”

“Ehe heh, isn’t it great? Dearest sister Efil made it for me! Here, touch it! It’s so fluffy!”

“I can touch it? I’ll take you up on— Oh wow, this is much fluffier than I thought!”

Melfina and I were sitting side by side on a bench, watching Shutola and Colette affectionately hugging Georgios. Although their

current appearances made them look more like an older sister and a younger sister, they had attended a prominent school on the Western Continent together, where they were known as Golden Sage and Silver Saint and constantly vied for the top grades. Through that experience, they'd become fast friends despite coming from different countries.

The reason we were in this park was to make time for the two of them. Or at least, that was part of the reason. The main one, however, was because I wanted time to talk with Mel about the Heroes' return. Since the information had come from Ange, I had no doubt about its veracity.

"The fact that they're coming back probably means they want to return to Japan, right?"

"That is why they were working hard to defeat the Demon Lord, after all."

"I mean, you did bring them over without their consent. I know it happens often in stories, but when you think about it objectively, it's a pretty terrible thing to do."

"You sure aren't mincing your words, honey! I've turned over a new leaf and now know that I should only bring over those who want to come. If I had done one more round of filtering to narrow it down to those who were willing, Touya's group wouldn't have gotten caught up in all this."

I peered into Melfina's downcast face. Judging by the angle of her brows, the way tears were welling up in her eyes, and the shape of her lips, I concluded that she really was feeling regretful about what had happened.

"Well, after all's said and done, they seem to have enjoyed the experience well enough. So, I guess you can say it worked out all right. Miyabi in particular seemed to be having the time of her life."

"Really?"

"Pretty sure. She's the type who's quite honest with herself but is bad at conveying her emotions. I know because she seems to hate me for some reason. That's why you should be the one to see them off. Make sure to thank them, okay?"

Melfina nodded wordlessly.

Honestly, it's gonna be fine. On the off chance that something happens, Colette will do something about it even if it costs her life, and I'll also be on hand. I'm sure we'll be able to wrap everything up with a nice bow.

"It's not like divine punishment would fall on me for asking them for one last match, right? I'm sure they've grown a lot during their time on the other continent."

"Honey, I really love the part of you that's able to stay honest no matter the situation. However, whether someone receives divine punishment is my decision to make. There's a famous restaurant called

Waterfall of White Droplets down an alleyway in the southern area of the city. Let's eat there. Of course, with as many helpings as we want."

The two of us naturally reached out to shake hands. This was the moment our ironclad bond was strengthened even further.

"Shutola-chan, look at that. It is the world's most sublime scene. It's so dazzling that I can't even look directly at it!"

"Huh? Uh, I guess?"

Chapter 3: The Heroes Return

The same day that a secret pact was forged between a goddess and a grim reaper, a feast was well underway in the royal palace of Faanis, a country in the southeast area of the Western Continent. Fire, the symbol and emblem of the country, could be found burning in braziers all over the capital, adding to the heat in the air all day long. People ate, drank, danced, sang, and told stories in celebration.

Sitting in the middle of those festivities were the Heroes of Deramis, the four young champions who had defeated an ancient dragon living in a volcano who had been terrorizing Faanis for a long, long time.

“Are you truly setting off tomorrow, Touya?” the king asked after two other Heroes who had been sitting nearby, Miyabi and Nana, got up to take a closer look at a fire display.

“We are. Our goal was to defeat the Demon Lord, but that’s already been done on the Eastern Continent. So, we need to head back to Deramis.”

“Well, I know I cannot stop you, but would you not be interested in staying a few more days? Everyone in this country, including me, would happily welcome it. In fact, if you are interested, my daughters —”

“Your Majesty, I’m flattered by the offer, but...” Touya shook his head apologetically.

“Ah, my apologies. You already have a promised one.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Ha ha ha! You need not hide it from me!”

“Uh...”

Figurative question marks floated above the teen’s head as comprehension dawned on the king’s face.

Setsuna watched their exchange from a distance, murmuring, “Phew, I’m glad he didn’t cause as many scandals today.”

However, her relief was short-lived, as the two princesses of the country suddenly burst onto the scene.

“Esteemed Hero! Are you really leaving?!”

“No, you mustn’t! You can’t leave me behind!”

“Oh, hi, princesses. Um, I’m sorry, but yes, I’m leaving.”

“Keep it down, you two! The banquet is still going on!”

“Father, shut it!”

“This is none of your business, father!”

Setsuna massaged her forehead before heading over to resolve the situation, as she always did.

At least Miyabi and Nana aren't here to complicate the conversation this time, she thought. Seeing silver linings was one of her superpowers by now.



Another full night of celebration passed, with the exhausted citizens eventually heading back home and even the merchants taking the day off. It was now early in the morning, but there was a flurry of activity in the royal castle. After having breakfast, the Heroes had gathered before the sole teleportation gate in the country. Voices lamenting their parting filled the room.

“Everyone, stay well until the day we meet again!”

“Byeeee!”

When Touya and Miyabi bade farewell to the soldiers and servants who had cared for them, shouts bordering on screaming ensued. The large majority were cries along the lines of “Don’t go!” but there were more than a few declarations of love surreptitiously slipped into the cacophony. The Heroes of Deramis had earned themselves a huge following in this country too.

Conversely, Nana and Setsuna, who weren’t good at handling such attention, turned to offer the king their farewells.

“Thank you for everything!”

“Thank you for putting up with us, Your Majesty.”

“Mm. I suppose that should be my line. Thank you for stopping my daughters when they went out of control last night.”

“They are both quite strong-willed, so I’m afraid I had no other choice...”

The king was referring to the two princesses who had suddenly approached Touya the night before. Although Setsuna had wanted to defuse the situation peacefully, both girls were so insistent in their affections that they were on the verge of resorting to force. As such, Setsuna had to resort to knocking them out with the back of her sword. Naturally, they were unharmed.

“Oh, it’s quite all right. Don’t let it bother you. The women of Faanis all have fire in their hearts, and nowhere does this manifest more clearly than in matters of romance. It’s to the point where ‘use force to win over the man you love’ is an aphorism here. What happened last night was entirely normal, and your actions were perfectly reasonable.”

“I...see...”

After the explanation from the king, Setsuna suddenly realized

that some of the shouting surrounding Touya was taking on a more aggressive tone. She wasn't sure if she was imagining it, but her long years of experience with handling such trouble were giving her a sense of foreboding.

The king was saying, "In fact, back in the day, my wife also forcefully—"

But Setsuna turned around and shouted, "Touya! We're making Colette wait!"

"Hm? Oh, is it already time?"

"Yes, it is! Right, Nana?!"

"Huh? Uh...I guess?"

Setsuna began herding her friends towards the teleportation gate as her misgivings gradually turned to certainty. There was no time to be polite about turning down everyone present. The sole thought in her mind was to get out of there as soon as possible. She could do without getting more wrinkles in her forehead.

"The teleportation gate has been authorized for use. It's connected!"

With perfect timing, the court mage started up the gate. All the Heroes had to do was fix a mental image of Deramis in their minds and step through it.

"Come on, let's go!"

"Okay, Setsuna, okay."

Just before the group was about to jump in, however, the king suddenly shouted, "Heroes of Deramis! I have one last question! Young as you are, you've successfully defeated the fire dragon, our bitter enemy of many years! So I ask this of you: how are you all so powerful?! Is it because you are the Heroes?!"

Did that question come from sheer curiosity or from his own longing for strength? The eyes of the King of Faanis shone like those of a young boy looking at his heroes.

A beat later, Touya turned around. "We're not strong because we're the Heroes. We're strong because we've been blessed with the people in our lives. The truth is, I have three teachers. One taught me how to live and how to fight. Another taught me how to truly care for my friends. The last—"

"Touya, the gate is closing! Your speech is too long!"

"Ah, sorry! Um, in other words, uh, let's meet again! Bye!"

Fwupt.

Touya's final words hung in the air as the energy powering the teleportation gate died down.

"Let's meet again.' I see. So, their strength comes from the encounters they've had and the bonds they've formed!"

"Ohhh, truly words befitting the Heroes. So profound!"

The king and his retainers felt deeply moved by Touya's words.



"Ugh..."

The whiteness of the palace walls made the scene seem brighter than it was. The four Heroes blinked furiously, trying their best to fight against the instinct to close their eyes.

"Touya, Setsuna, Miyabi, and Nana. Welcome back from your long journey. Your quest is over. You have done well."

The Heroes recognized this clear, bell-like voice—it was the first one they had heard when they'd arrived in this world.

"The Holy Empire of Deramis welcomes you, O Heroes. I am the Oracle of this country, Colette Deramilius, the one who first called you over...or at least, I think that's what I said last time. It has been quite a while, hasn't it?"

"COLETTE!" all four voices exclaimed.

The Oracle was wearing the exact same outfit ornamented in white and silver that they remembered first seeing her in. The teens rushed over to greet her like a long-lost friend but then stopped short when they noticed the two figures flanking her.

"Welcome back, everyone."

"Good, you all look like you're fighting fit!"

"Honey."

"Oh, I meant...hey, you all look well!"

On one side was a man with black hair and black eyes wearing a black outfit that no Deramisian ever would. On the other was the smiling goddess who had granted Touya and the rest their powers when they came to this world.

Colette stood between them, looking more elated than the Heroes had ever seen her.

Touya's shout reverberated through the room. "You're Goddess Melfina! And Teacher's here too!"

"Who the heck is 'Teacher'? Wait, me?!" Although Kelvin was confused for a moment about whom Touya was referring to, the boy's direct gaze soon cleared up that question.

"Of course you are! You taught us so much! You're my second teacher, Kelvin-san!"

"Dude, you can't just make me your teacher..."

Setsuna, the problem solver of the Heroes' party, immediately apologized. "I'm sorry, Kelvin-san. Around the time when we crossed to the Western Continent, Touya started calling you by that name."

Oh right, I forgot how practiced she is at this role. Poor girl. I bet she's had it the worst throughout their journey.

"Oh well. It's fine; you call me whatever you want."

“Then ‘Lecher,’” Miyabi said in a matter-of-fact tone as she poked her head out from behind Setsuna’s back.

“You should probably hold back a bit, though, don’t you think? Let me guess...you read my entry in the Adventurer Directory?”

“Not only that. There are more girls behind you than last time we met. All of them are pretty. This verifies the claim in the Directory.”

Miyabi pointed behind Kelvin, where his companions—Efil, Sera, Ange, Rion, and the rest—were standing in a line. He could practically feel her pointed gaze burrowing into his skin.

“That’s...fair. I won’t deny it. But the same applies to Touya, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t underestimate him. Touya is both oblivious and hard of hearing. He’s never been in a relationship with a girl. He’s the protagonist of protagonists, the ultimate protagonist.”

As Miyabi started going on a spiel about just what it was that made a good protagonist, Shutola trotted over with small steps and slipped her hand into Kelvin’s.

“Dearest brother, are these people the Heroes of Deramis?”

“Let me correct myself. Not ‘Lecher’ but ‘Lolicon Lecher.’ Hi, Lolicon Lecher.”

“Okay, hold on. *That* I strongly protest. This isn’t what you’re making it out to be.”

“Miyabi-chan, you shouldn’t say things like that...”

Nana stepped in to stop Miyabi, but the look she gave Kelvin showed she had doubts of her own. Miyabi’s thoughtless comment had clearly harmed her image of Kelvin.

Melfina cleared her throat. “Everyone, may I move on to the main topic?”

“Silence, please! Melfina-sama wishes to bless us with her words!” Colette clapped her hands loudly, interrupting the exchange that would probably have continued on if left alone.

Setsuna held Miyabi back as Sera did the same with Kelvin, allowing the scene to resume some measure of order. Melfina nodded her thanks to Colette, then turned to look at the Heroes.

“Thank you truly for your help in restoring peace to this world, everyone. Regardless of how it happened, the Demon Lord has indeed been defeated. Although you were not directly involved in the fight, your noble actions elsewhere in the world undoubtedly saved numerous lives. However, please let me say this: I deeply apologize for bringing all of you to this world on my own judgment without asking for your consent.”

Melfina lowered her head deeply, prompting Colette to do the same. Unable to simply stand by, Kelvin also apologized in earnest.

“Wait, huh?! Goddess Melfina, you don’t need to do that!”

“Please raise your head too, Colette! Wait, why is Kelvin-san also...”

“I mean, because I’m not entirely unrelated,” Kelvin said. “After all, Melfina is my, y’know...”

“Your what?”

After this, the teenagers unsurprisingly focused on questioning the relationship between Kelvin and Melfina, the apology already accepted and forgotten.



How did things end up this way? Touya wondered, his mind muddled with confusion as he stared at the mother-daughter pair of maids standing across from him on the other side of the expansive training hall beneath Kelvin’s residence. These two were his first opponents, and he, as the wielder of Holy Sword Will, was supposed to fight them by himself. *Right, it all started with what Goddess Melfina said.*

The goddess had given Touya and his companions two options: accept their souvenirs and return to their own world or stay in this one. At first, all four of them had been ready to choose the former. It was regrettable that they hadn’t gotten to defeat the Demon Lord, and they had had a great time in this world, but they had family and friends waiting back in Japan. If their power was no longer absolutely necessary here, there was no need to worry their loved ones any further.

At least, that had been their mindset until the goddess said, “A new danger is approaching, but we will take care of it ourselves.”

What was that danger? Was it a threat greater than the Demon Lord? Touya had pressed her for details, but she’d continued insisting that she did not want to involve them. He knew that if he went home, the matter would consume him for a long, long time to come.

“Since we’re already here, please let us help!”

Unlike before, Touya did not make this decision for the entire team; instead, they had discussed and agreed on it together. In the end, they had decided to resolve this “new danger” before returning home. However, that was not the end of the matter.

“This new danger is even greater than the Demon Lord. Would you mind if we first test how strong you’ve all become?” the goddess had asked.

“We don’t mind at all,” Miyabi had replied without missing a beat. “Rather, we *want* to show you. We’ve grown a lot on the Western Continent.”

Nana was slightly apprehensive. “Miyabi-chan, let’s not raise the hurdle for ourselves...”

Kelvin then spoke up. "As for where to do it...how about my place? You can go all out there, and there's no chance of outside interference. Colette, mind if we borrow these four for a while?"

"Just in case this happened, I already asked for permission from His Holiness. Authorization to use the Deramisian teleportation gate has been added to your guild card, Kelvin-sama, so you can go back and forth as you please."

"I knew you would pull through, Colette. You are the best Oracle a goddess can ask for," said Melfina.

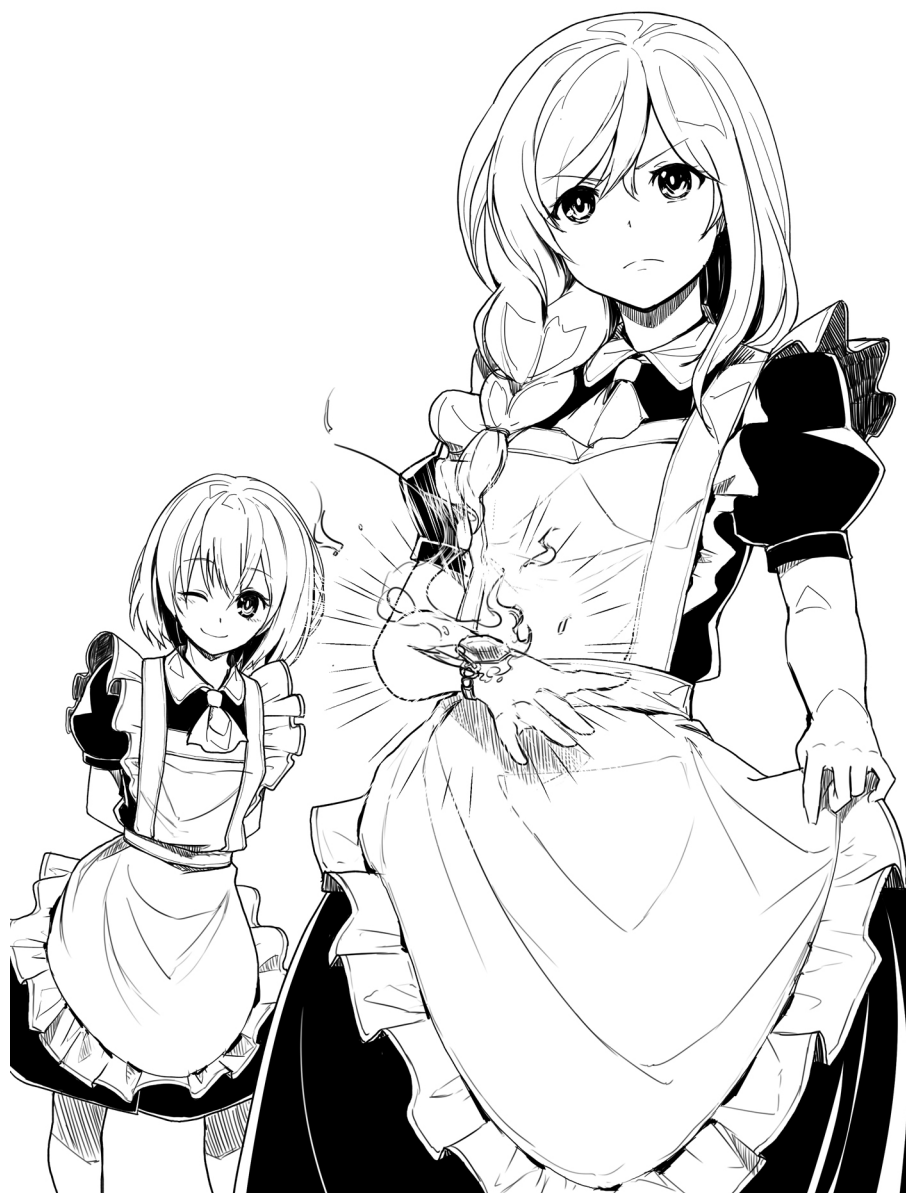
"You... You honor me too much, Melfina-sama!"

And so, everything had been decided in the blink of an eye. Setsuna was somewhat suspicious about how smoothly the situation developed, but the other three Heroes just let themselves be guided along and had ultimately ended up here...which was why Touya was now in his current predicament.

"Thank you for the honor of this fight, esteemed Hero."

"We won't hold back, mister!"

Touya's opponents were raring to go. The mother held out a hand wearing a bracelet embedded with a red jewel as the daughter raised a dagger and lowered her center of gravity. The latter seemed ready to lunge as soon as the starting signal was given.



“I’ve cast Arcadia on all of you and Tabernacle on this area. The former will nullify one fatal attack and the latter will contain all attacks within the area of the match. Please fight to your heart’s content.” After giving him that simple explanation, Colette returned to the spectator stand.

“Say, Kel-nii, wouldn’t it have been faster for you to cast those spells yourself?” Rion asked. “You were wearing Astarte’s Embrace when she cast it on you during your exhibition match, right?”

Kelvin replied, “Astarte’s Embrace did finish analyzing the spells, so I’d love to use them myself. Unfortunately, it seems like only the Oracle of Deramis can employ them. It’s like a bloodline ability, I guess? Not much I can do about that. So, to prevent tragedy from striking again, I had Colette use MP from Clotho’s Storage.”

“Ahh,” Sera said, comprehension dawning on her face. “So that’s why she looks fine even after casting so many Rank S spells.”

Ange cupped her hands around her mouth. “Ruka-chan! Just do like I taught you!”

Not understanding a thing that was being said on Kelvin’s side, Touya turned to look at his companions. “Um, those two are maids, right?” he asked in bewilderment.

“They’re wearing the uniform.” Setsuna shrugged. “But don’t let your guard down. Remember, they’re maids in Kelvin-san’s house.”

“Servants being stronger than average soldiers, very common,” Miyabi added. “By the way, the locals call this house ‘Demon’s Haunt.’ Info from the guild. Ah, Ms. Maid, another juice, please.”

“Immediately, Miyabi-sama.”

Although Miyabi was nonchalantly ordering refills from the maid on standby next to her—who was actually the ancient dragon Rosalia—Setsuna and Nana at least seemed worried about Touya. However, none of them had yet realized that the opponents waiting to fight him had been among the hostages they had saved in Toraj.

“All right, it’s about time to start. Just saying, Touya—if you haven’t gotten any stronger, you’ll very likely lose. And if you lose, it means you’re nowhere near powerful enough to fight with us.”

“I won’t let you down, Teacher!”

“I’m not sure how long it’ll take me to get used to being called... Anyway, Mel.”

“Both sides, ready...FIGHT!”



Ruka was the first to move. The instant the starting signal was given, she activated Covert Action and circled around behind Touya at top speed. Then she crouched, adopting a pose that made it easy to

lunge forward.

Wha—?

Just as she was about to push off, however, to her great surprise, Ruka's foot slipped and she fell over. What's more, she even caused a loud thud by doing so. Although Covert Action was still active, such a loud noise made it much easier for her position to be noticed. And sure enough, Touya caught on.

The training hall was open to everyone living in this house, including the servants. As such, Ruka came here often to train with Gerard, Rion, and anyone else who was willing. In other words, she knew the room like the back of her hand. The sturdy black flooring offered better purchase than its glossy surface suggested, making it nigh impossible for Ruka, who was so familiar with it, to make such a blatant slip.

Oh no, oh no, I can practically hear mom angrily saying, "Ruka, how can you mess up so badly when Master's watching?!"

Flames burst into view and enveloped Ellie's right hand like a visualization of her anger. Her bracelet gleamed as the crimson fire took on form.

"Pyrodragon!"

When Ellie finished chanting, she had at her command a dragon made of flames. Though one notch smaller, it bore a great resemblance to one of the heads of the dragons from Efil's Pyrohydra spell. This spell, which was one of the flashiest in Ellie's arsenal, successfully drew Touya's attention, allowing Ruka a fraction of a second to once again mask her presence using Covert Action. This perfect teamwork was a product of the bond between a mother and daughter who had lived together for so long.

"Although I am unworthy to even tie Efil-sama's shoes, esteemed Hero, I shall presume to be your opponent."

"Wow, that dragon looks really cool. But I'm sorry, I've already fought another dragon that's much more powerful and scarier than what you've got there."

CLANG!

Touya's sword deflected the kunai that Ruka threw from behind his back as if he had seen it coming from the very start. At that instant, Ruka revealed herself, and Pyrodragon surged forward with a bang. The fight had started in earnest.

Ruka ran circles around Touya, darting in and out while repeatedly throwing kunai hidden on her person. However, she continued to mess up for some reason—every other blade she took out slipped due to a sweaty hand, dust accidentally seemed to get into her eye and threw off her aim, and she misstepped and lost her balance whenever she tried to get in close. She barely managed to keep going

by utilizing her impressive speed, but it was clear that she was having trouble bringing her full potential to the fight.

“You’re fast, but...not as fast as Setsuna!”

The same misfortune seemed to plague Ellie as she struggled to make Pyrodragon do what she wanted. Her fighting style involved using the dragon—which was hot enough to melt the ground—to zero in on opponents like a hawk, but her control was lacking its usual finesse. No matter what she did, the dragon’s movements ended up wild and muddled, sometimes even veering away from Touya altogether. She, too, was having trouble giving it her all.

It looks like Ruka’s also out of sorts today, she thought. *In that case...*

Ellie shifted Pyrodragon to autocontrol mode and held out her right hand once more. “Fire Rain,” she murmured before flinging her arm, scattering flames into the air that rapidly grew in size before falling back down like a deluge of burning raindrops.

“Hup!”

“Wha— No, hold— Mom!”

The drops that were supposed to fall randomly somehow ended up largely avoiding Touya and gathering around Ruka instead. Credit where credit was due, the young girl still managed to evade them all by contorting her body in various ways thanks to her Acrobatics skill.

“It looks like Ellie’s starting to figure out Touya’s disposition,” Kelvin observed from the spectator stand.

“What disposition is that, Master?”

“Basically, the effect of his Unique Skill, Absolute Gospel. What do you think it does, Efil?”

“Seeing how badly Ellie and Ruka are faring, I’d venture to say that it causes misfortune to those he’s facing?”

“Hah! If only it were that mild. Not sure if you remember, but the previous Hero, Serge Flore—the one who’s now Fourth Seat of the Apostles—possesses the same skill. Simply put, it makes him so fortunate that those facing him end up ruining themselves, and situations end up in his favor without him even lifting a finger.”

Kelvin pointed out the relevant entry in the information on the Network.

“Ah, so that’s where I’ve heard the skill name before. However, Master, I don’t seem to remember the same phenomenon happening when we first met Touya-sama in Toraj.”

“There’s probably a condition for it. For example, it becomes deactivated when there’s someone with higher Luck than him around.”

“What?! How’d you kn— Ah!”

Kelvin’s guess prompted a reaction from Nana, who was also watching the match from the spectator seats. A very conspicuous

reaction, at that.

“Nana...”

“Nana, you airhead.”

Unable to bear the reproachful stares from Setsuna and Miyabi, Nana wailed, “I’m sorryyy!” prompting a consoling “*Rawr...*” from her backpack.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell any outsiders,” Kelvin said reassuringly. “Just be careful next time, yeah?”

“Thank y— Huh?”

Nana was just about to question Kelvin’s use of the word “outsider” when a massive explosion went off. Fire flooded the entire space within the barrier, with Touya and Ruka furiously exchanging blows while zipping between the limited patches of safe ground. Each time, either Ruka’s Strengthened Mithril Dagger was chipped against Holy Sword Will or she suffered another cut on her body. Misfortune notwithstanding, Touya was just better with a blade than she was. Ellie’s Pyrodragon was nowhere to be seen, having been cut down by Will a while back.

“Ruka! I’m using all the MP I have left in the next attack! Think of it as your last opportunity!”

For the first time during the fight, Ellie shouted out loud. The Ruby Bracelet she had on was a Rank A item that made fire-based spells cost two-thirds less MP, increased the damage of fire-based spells, and helped her to control her magic with greater precision. Basically, it was a wand in bracelet form. Even so, Ellie had used the Rank A Red Magic spell Pyrodragon and the Rank B Red Magic spell Fire Rain so many times that her MP was scraping bottom.

“How...about...this!”

Ruka threw something in all four directions that immediately blasted black smoke that filled the space inside the barrier in the blink of an eye. The range it covered led Touya to conclude that it was not poisonous, but he still held his breath just in case.

A simple smoke screen? I should move fir—

Touya spent only a split second thinking, but Ruka did not let it pass. Three blades rushed towards the Hero from different directions, aimed at his feet, heart, and throat.

“Spirit of Light!”

In response to Touya’s cry, light blossomed in the darkness. This was the first time he had felt the need to ask for help from the spirit that had given him its Blessing. Thanks to the light, he now had a certain degree of visibility even within the black smoke. This enabled him to evade the first kunai and deflect the second with his sword. The last appeared from the smoke, wielded by Ruka directly.

With a sharp metallic sound, Will bisected Ruka’s blade

immediately above the guard. However, the small maid's onslaught was not over. She used Sky Walk—which she had only learned recently—to quickly change direction in midair and get a kick in. It was too late for Touya to evade it, and he could not bring his sword arm back in time to block. He had no choice but to take the attack.

I'm sorry, little girl, but with the difference in our heights, that kick isn't going to hurt me that m— Ugh! A flash of pain too sharp for a kick shot through the arm Touya had raised in defense. *She's got a knife sticking out of her shoe!*

Although the sudden pain did surprise him for a moment, he quickly swung his sword at Ruka. He used the back of the blade, but there was more than enough force in the attack to knock her unconscious. Even as she fell, however, she had a “Gotcha!” smile on her face.

“Belial Claw!”

“Augh!”

In a split second, a hand of fire large enough to envelop an entire person burst out of the remaining black cloud and grabbed Holy Sword Will, halting its movement. The flames were so close to Touya that they began searing his skin.

“This is the end.”

“Didn't you say you only have enough MP left for one spell?”

“Unfortunately, I can't seem to control my magic as well as I want today. I must have mistaken how much I had left.”

Ellie lunged forward, her right hand clad in another Belial Claw, the flames that formed it burning even brighter than the ones holding down Touya's sword. Clearly, her shout from earlier had been a complete lie.

“And so, though this is not my usual style, I am forgoing precision and attacking a large area instead. Ready yourself!”

“I've been ready from the start!”

Holy Sword Will shone brightly with the light quickly gathering at Touya's left hand and taking the form of a copy of itself. A moment later, holy light and crimson flames clashed.



“I'm truly sorry, Efil-sama.”

“Sorryyy!”

“There is no need for apologies; both of you performed well against a superior opponent. Look forward to your staff meals today.”

“Yay!”

After Kelvin healed them using White Magic, the two maids had gathered in a corner of the training hall to review the match that had just ended. Put simply, Ellie and Ruka had lost. However, if one were

to judge by appearances, Touya looked far worse off. While the two maids were basically unharmed aside from having been knocked unconscious, Touya had severe burns all over his body and Ruka's knife buried deep inside his arm. To make matters worse, the wound had turned a very nasty color.

"Ughhhhh," he grunted as he pulled it out. "Gah! I knew it; this knife is poisoned. If Spirit of Light hadn't helped alleviate its effects, I just might have been in a tight spot."

"Kanzaki-kun, are you okay?!" Nana cried worriedly, rushing over. "I'll heal you now!"

Touya flashed her a refreshing smile. "Hey, don't worry about it. I can heal something like this myself." He placed his other hand over his wound and cast Bright Heal and Cure Poison. The next instant, his arm was as good as new. Soon enough, the burns disappeared as well.

"I'm impressed," Kelvin said appreciatively, walking over. "You've gotten twice as strong as when I saw you last."

Miyabi immediately adopted a martial arts pose, but Touya took a step forward and eagerly asked, "Does that mean we've lived up to your expectations, Teacher?!"

Kelvin's step faltered a beat. "You're getting a little ahead of yourself. And stop it with that handsome grin. Your teeth are blinding me." Apparently, he was as bad at dealing with Touya as ever. He cleared his throat. "I have one more test for you," he said before raising four fingers on his right hand and the index finger on his left. "How does one-on-four sound?"

"As in...four people on the level of the maids just now?" Touya asked.

Setsuna had a doubtful look on her face, but Miyabi raised a thumb and said in her usual deadpan tone, "You can do it, Touya. Good luck."

"All right, just watch me!" Touya replied, pumped up by what he perceived to be a challenge posed by his mentor.

Nana asked worriedly, "You're...sure about this, Kanzaki-kun?"

"No, no, no, that's not it," Kelvin cut in. "You've misunderstood. You guys are the four."

Touya looked surprised. "We are?"

Setsuna's eyes took on a sharp glint. "So you want all of us to fight at the same time?"

"That's right." Kelvin nodded. "Your opponent will be—"

"Me, yes?" Gerard stepped up from behind him, rage emanating from every opening in his armor. He was armed with Dainsleif and Dreadnought, and Crimson Mantle was on his back. The aura surrounding him was that of a warrior about to charge into battle, completely out of place for what was supposed to be a friendly

practice match.

“Heh heh heh...the price must be paid for harming a grandchild of mine!”

Clearly, he was on the warpath, Colette’s spell notwithstanding. However, Kelvin tapped his armor.

“Gerard, no. *I’m* the one who’s going to fight them.”

“Don’t stop me, my king! I have just found my second fated enemy!”

“You hearing me? I’m saying don’t steal my pre—disciples from me!”

The fierce argument between Kelvin, whose point of contention had gone entirely off the mark, and Gerard, who seemed hell-bent on revenge, continued without any sign of ending. Neither seemed to care about hiding his desires, bickering so relentlessly they seemed about to fight each other instead. The Heroes watched in a daze, shocked by what the situation had suddenly turned into.

“Um, Kel-nii, Gramps?”

“What is it, Rion?”

“Yes, Rion?”

The instant Rion spoke up, however, the pair immediately stopped arguing and their expressions and auras instantly softened up. The Heroes were shocked once again, this time by how much of a doting brother and grandfather the two were.

“Can I fight them instead? After watching Ruka-chan, now I want to get a bit of exercise too.”

“You, Rion? But...”

“I would normally say yes to whatever you ask, Rion dear, but it is my calling to—”

“Pretty please?”

Rion’s teary upturned eyes caused both men to jerk backwards, clutching their chests. They both gave their assent without further protest. In this way, Rion managed to win the right to fight the Heroes. Seeing such a cute young girl taking on the role of becoming their opponent, the Heroes...

“So, what’s with this farce?”

“Miyabi, shh! You’re supposed to keep quiet in this kind of situation.”

“Um...in any case, Teacher will acknowledge us if we beat her, right?”

The Heroes had managed to pull themselves back together.

“Ehe heh! And there you have it. I’ll be the one fighting you. Let’s have a good time!” Rion extended a hand, flashing a smile so friendly that it could have made anyone fall for her. Even though her outfit was all black, her smile was so dazzling that she came across as an

angel.

“S-Sure. Let’s have a good time.” Nana took the offered hand. She had been flustered many times today, but she now felt the tension that locked her body draining away as Rion’s distinctive aura imparted to her a sense of calm.

“I’m gonna go prepare now!” Rion said before heading back over to where Kelvin stood.

“Literal angel,” Miyabi declared.

“What a cute girl,” Nana mumbled. “Can she really fight?”

“I wonder,” Setsuna replied doubtfully.

“What’re you guys saying? That’s Teacher’s younger sister. Look, right here!” Touya produced a copy of the Adventurer Directory seemingly out of nowhere and flipped to the page on Kelvin’s party with a practiced hand before pointing to the section on Rion. “Her name is ‘Black Meteor’ Rion Celsius. Her Danger Ranking is the lowest, but the Directory vouches for her strength. Don’t be deceived by her appearance!”

Setsuna and Miyabi both clutched their heads, but for very different reasons.

“D-Did I just get told off by Touya?!”

“Younger sister? YOUNGER SISTER?! That monster...and that angel are RELATED?! And he even dotes on her?! HAS GOD GONE MAD?!”

“Oh my gosh, you scared me, Miyabi-chan! I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you shout so loudly. A-Are you okay?”

Distress and consternation racked the Heroes for a while until Kelvin’s shout brought them back to their senses. “Hey, you guys! Hurry up and prepare!”

“Understood, Teacher!” Touya replied. “Come on, guys, let’s go!”

“Okay...”

“Gooo...”

“I got told off by Touya...”

The teenagers stepped forward, making their way to their next battlefield while inwardly thanking Rion for sparing them from fighting the two overly eager opponents from before.



“Are you sure about this? Letting Rion-sama have the fight?” Efil asked while passing chilled drinks to Kelvin and Gerard, who had returned to the spectator stand.

Despite having their rights to the fight seized by Rion, both were beaming happily. “Can’t help it if it’s Rion,” they replied in unison.

“Joking aside, Rion is probably the most suitable for gauging their strength,” Kelvin added. “She’s an all-rounder who knows both

swordsmanship and magic. No matter what strategies the Heroes come up with, she'll be able to deal with it."

Sera and Melfina popped up, pointing to themselves.

"I think I fit that description too."

"And me."

Kelvin shook his head. "The spells you two use are pretty nasty and hard to dial down. In that respect, we don't have anything to worry about with Rion."

"Indeed! I'm sure Rion will be able to accurately judge their true worth! Ga ha ha!"

In a complete one-eighty from mere minutes before, Kelvin and Gerard were completely in sync with each other. Efil, however, looked worried.

"Um, Master...didn't the Beast King give Rion-sama special training that's made her take fights against other people very seriously?"

"Ah."

"Dearest brother, Rion-chan's match is starting soon!"

The Grim Reaper's tendency to forget one crucial fact before making decisions had struck once again.



Colette was in the middle of casting Arcadia on all the combatants with the exception of Touya, who was still protected by the spell from the previous match.

"Um, Colette, can Mun-chan participate too?" Nana asked, casting a glance at her backpack.

"Of course." Colette nodded. "Kelvin-sama notified me beforehand. It only makes sense for Tamers to fight with their monster partners."

"Phew, thank you. Mun-chan, we can fight together!"

"*Rawr!*"

Nana placed a hand on her chest and sighed in relief. Her hand sank a little, showing how well-endowed she was despite her small build.

"Aside from what Touya just revealed, Rion-sama does not know what abilities you use. As such, I recommend that you carefully consider your timing when revealing each one. All right, Mun is now protected as well."

"Thank you for the advice and all the spells, Colette."

"You are very welcome, Setsuna. I will now head over to help Rion-sama."

Colette made her way to the other side, where Rion was in the middle of stretching.

“Hi, Colette. You’re done with Secchan and all?”

“Yes, I have finished casting Arcadia on Setsuna and the others. I did a good job, if I do say so myself. I could not be more thankful to Clotho-sama. Now, please stand still while I do the same for you, Rion-sama.”

“Oh, hold on. I just remembered that Alex is taking an afternoon nap right now.” Rion squatted down and, propping her head with both fists, spoke to her shadow. “Alex, wakey, wakey. I got a match.”

A short while later, her shadow ballooned in size, startling the Heroes into raising their guards. Soon, the large wolf rose up with the biggest yawn ever.

“Awoo...?” (Time for food?)

“Aha ha ha, not quite, sleepyhead. But if you ask Efil-nee, she might make you something.”

“Arf...” (Efil...)

With loping strides, Alex ran off towards the spectator stand. The moment he arrived, Shutola latched onto him.

“Is that large wolf Rion-chan’s monster partner?” Setsuna asked warily. “It seems really powerful from its presence.”

Nana tilted her head. “Maybe Rion-chan is a Tamer like I am?”

“No, no, the Directory had her down as a Sword Saint. Either way, it’s left the barrier, which means we won’t be fighting it.”

“Very cute.”

Soon, Colette had also finished casting Arcadia on Rion. She bowed courteously one last time, then turned to head back to the spectator stand.

“The match will begin soon,” Mel said. “Both sides ready?”

“Any time!”

“We’re good to go!”

The Heroes braced themselves, with Touya and Setsuna in front, Nana in the back, and Miyabi in between.

“Very well.” Mel raised a hand. “With honor and sportsmanship...FIGHT!”

Her hand came down with a sharp *whoosh*.



The first thing to do was observe our opponent. I watched as Rion drew two black swords. However, Touya had the advantage due to possessing both the Swordsmanship and Dual Wield skills. Or at least, I hoped so. The latter was a skill that only a Hero could pick up, and it made a pretty significant difference in close-quarters combat.

It also worked in our favor that Rion did not have any info on us. My Iron Cutting Authority could cut through anything as long as it landed, ignoring Status and all other factors. Miyabi and Nana also

had spells that could take someone by surprise. What's more, we had Mun on our side, and Mun had grown a *lot* on our adventures.

We can do this.

"Guys, we're giving it all we've got from the get-go!" Touya shouted to drum us up, already holding two Wills and in a fighting stance himself.

"No need to tell me twice," Miyabi replied. "Vengeful Grave Death Ogre!" The ground beneath her feet cracked open, then a giant form rose up, perfectly positioned to lift her onto its shoulder. After Kelvin had destroyed Miyabi's Grave Death Ogre at the Black Wind headquarters in Toraj, she had resurrected it by directing every last scrap of pent-up resentment she had towards it. Doing so had apparently given it a power-up as well.

"Mun-chan!"

"Rawr!"

The mouth of the backpack on Nana's back, which was connected to a hyperspace pocket created by Miyabi, opened wide as Mun flew out. During our travels, what used to be a whelp fire dragon had Evolved into an ancient fire dragon. Mun was now powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with the fire dragon in Faanis, making it much more of a reliable companion than when it had simply been hiding behind Nana.

I was no slouch myself either, having learned how to use Iron Cutting Authority without announcing it out loud. Although each of us individually might not have been a match for Kelvin, if we fought as a team...

"Huh? She disappeared?"

"No! Nana, behind you!"

I managed to catch it only because I had been staring directly at Rion and because I had the best dynamic vision in our party. She had circled around behind the person farthest in the back on our side—Nana—with such incredible speed that sparks crackled on the burnt path she had taken along the edge of the training hall.

"Huh?"

Even though I had warned Nana about the impending danger, she didn't have the ability to avoid it. She would be done for before she finished turning around. Miyabi was the closest, but there was no time for her to chant a spell. Touya, who was at the front, was the most unsuitable for dealing with such a situation.

That leaves me. Wait, but...

"RAWR!"

"Mun-chan?!"

It was Mun who saved Nana in her moment of crisis. To be more precise, Mun had sacrificed himself in her place. The vicious blade aimed at Nana's neck bisected Mun's instead, beheading the dragon.

He had been able to see what was going on because he'd had a bird's-eye view of the battlefield after flying up out of the backpack.

"Since you're using a dragon, I thought it'd be fastest to take out the one giving it instructions. You're a support type, right? Mm, you have a good partner, Nacchan."

"Huh? Eh? What?"

The friendly smile on Rion's face looked so out of place that it threw Nana into even greater confusion. Before our eyes, Mun recovered thanks to Colette's power, then was ejected through the arena barrier. The barrier would detect when we died and send us out too.

If only Colette had explained all this— No, I need to be thankful right now. I'm glad Nana didn't catch what happened with Mun; nothing good would've come from her seeing how it looked when he was regenerating.

"Nana, move!" Miyabi shouted, charging over on her ogre. The monster's fist was already raised, its force ready to be unleashed at any moment.

Touya and I were also dashing over as fast as we could.

That's right; this is no time to be spacing out. Mun might have saved Nana from one attack, but Rion-chan is still close to her.

"I'm sor—"

"You really oughta focus in the middle of a fight, Nacchan. Magnetic Whip."

"Wh—?"

Something long and thin snaked out and wrapped around Nana's arm. Her body jolted and her knees gave out as if she had just been electrocuted. At the same moment, however, ice pillars rose from the ground one after another.

Nice, Nana managed to cast Frozen Temple just before she lost consciousness! Now Rion-chan's speed will be brought down to a crawl. She shouldn't be able to use any buff spells either.

Craaaack!

"Oh, this is more brittle than I thought."

Rion immediately surpassed my expectations. She forcefully lifted a leg even though she was supposed to be frozen in place. After that, she continued moving like normal.

A-At least she isn't zipping around at crazy speeds like before.

"Shouldn't look away during battle," Miyabi chided Rion as her ogre unleashed a punch.

"Oh, I'm looking, Micchan. Here, have Nacchan back."

Rion swung her hand, and the electric line wrapped around Nana extended like a whip. It lifted the unconscious girl up and threw her directly towards the oncoming fist.

A grunt of frustration escaped Miyabi's lips as she urgently made

her monster pull its punch back. Colette's spell only activated when the target suffered damage that was actually life-threatening, and the same went for the barrier's eject function. In her current situation, Nana was just a convenient shield.

Given how close she was, Miyabi probably could save Nana. However, if her ogre grabbed Nana with its fist, it would probably be electrocuted too, and so would Miyabi because she was sitting on its shoulder. Beyond that, the whole situation smacked of a trap, leading Miyabi to ultimately decide to leave Nana alone.

"You're not gonna catch her?" Rion asked, sounding disappointed. "Then I guess I'll do this."

The whip cracked again, this time sending Nana flying towards me at great speed.

So now she's using Nana as a weapon? Oh right, I forgot. Rion-chan is Kelvin-san's sister, after all.

Considering how fast Nana was going, I knew that if I caught her properly, I, and probably Touya too, would end up with huge injuries. That left the question of whether to dodge or not. I was capable of doing so. However, if I made that choice, it would leave Nana to crash into the ground. Thanks to Arcadia, she would probably be fine, merely made to leave the match area. What's more, she was already unconscious, so she wouldn't feel any pain. However, I really did not want to make that choice.

"Touya, circle around Nana and go ahead!"

"What?! You know I—"

"Leave Nana to me!"

"Wh— Okay!"

Touya chose to trust me and took off at an angle. The instant she saw Rion throw Nana again, Miyabi had instructed her ogre to resume its punch. A loud crash rang out as fist met sword.

"Miyabi! Make something to catch Nana with!"

"I'm...fighting now... You...ask a lot."

Despite her complaints, I knew she would pull through. And sure enough...

"Skull Brigade."

Even while directing her ogre in close-quarters combat, Miyabi summoned a large army of bare-handed skeletons. They had numbers, but they weren't particularly useful. The spell was great for situations that called for quantity over quality, but they could not catch Nana.

"Slimefy."

Next, Miyabi transformed a whole group of the skeletons into a pack of very bouncy and elastic slimes before gathering them together. I had previously thought Slimefy to be a joke spell, as it couldn't be used on enemies, but now our preparations for cushioning

Nana were complete. All that was left was for me to do my part.

“I’ll have you return Nana to us!”

At the moment Nana would have crashed into me, I dodged by a paper-thin margin, keeping my eyes on the electrical whip. I only needed to come into contact with it for a split second—I ended things before the electricity could travel down my blade.

Shhhnk.

A beautiful *clink* sounded as my katana returned to its sheath. It had been a quick draw from a rather unstable stance, but it had gone just as I’d visualized. Iron Cutting Authority had beautifully separated Nana from the electrical whip, and she had landed right on the group of slimes, which fully absorbed the impact of her landing. Although she was still unconscious, we had saved her.

“Miyabi, sorry to keep you waiting!”

“You’re late.”

Miyabi grumbled at Touya when he finally rejoined the fight, but the look on her face was the one she made when she was secretly happy inside. I could tell now, after having spent so much time with her.

Touya immediately leaped into close-quarters combat with Rion, cooperating with Miyabi’s ogre to overwhelm her with attacks. Between them, they had Touya’s two swords, the ogre’s brutal fists, and the occasional Black Magic spell, but frighteningly enough, Rion managed to handle everything that came at her. And through it all, not once did the smile on her face slip. The toughness of her black swords also seemed off the charts, seeing as they never chipped once after parrying the ogre’s attacks so many times.

I thought we were the ones with the initiative, but...

“Nana’s fine! I’m coming over now!”

“Kay!”

After I’d told him to leave Nana to me, Touya had not looked back even once. My shout was meant to reassure him. We also had the skeletons on our side. Although they’d arrive at the front line later than me, and although they might not be able to contribute much individually, the saying went that in war, numbers were what c—

“Sorry, you actually don’t want your friend there.”

“What are you—”

“I placed a trap there.”

KANG KANG KANG KANG KANG!!!

A metallic cacophony rang out behind me. I used Sky Walk to turn around while putting some distance between myself and what was going on behind me, my stomach sinking in despair.

“You’re kidding me...”

Everything had been reduced to dust. The skeletons from Skull

Brigade, including those turned into slimes with Slimefy, and worst of all, that huge puddle of blood...

"That was Prison of Slashes, with me getting a little serious. I was torn over whether to use it or not, but now I'm glad I did," Rion said with a cheeky smile, like she was a friend sharing a fun little secret.

I suddenly remembered that the location where Nana had landed was the precise location where Rion had stood at the very beginning of the fight.

So, what, she set something up ahead of time? In the brief moment she was standing there? What'd she do?

Naturally, Nana was now out of the fight. She suddenly reappeared in the spectator stand, blinking in confusion. I breathed a sigh of relief that she had no memory of what had happened to her.

"After exchanging that many blows with me, isn't Mr. Ogre there nearing its limit?"

"Don't need your concerns. My Vengeful Grave Death Ogre is invincible."

"Ven...ven...venti?"

"No. Vengeful Grave Death Ogre."

"How did that song go again? 'Mr. Ogre, Mr. Ogre, I'm over heeere!'"

"Say it properly!"

Miyabi really liked the name she had chosen for her ogre, and the way Rion seemed to not care about getting it right was really getting to her. While Rion retreated with backsteps at lightning speed, Miyabi followed to press her attack.

Touya chased after the two of them but was slightly behind. An uneasy feeling filled my chest. I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, but I thought Miyabi's ogre was moving slower than usual...even though it was supposed to never tire.

"Miyabi, don't go too far ahead!" I warned her.

"I know," Miyabi replied. "I'm chasing her while keeping a good distance."

She sounded surprisingly calm, apparently not having let the adrenaline overwhelm her as much as I thought. Just as she said, her ogre was pursuing Rion while maintaining enough of a distance to react when our opponent did something.

But then why do I still feel so uneasy?

Miyabi told Rion, "If you're gonna keep running, then here, Felony Cru—"

Just as Miyabi was about to cast another spell, Vengeful Grave Death Ogre suddenly lost both its arms. They fell off cleanly, as if they had been chopped off with a blade.

"What?!" Miyabi exclaimed in astonishment as the monster

suddenly pitched forward, having lost its balance.

“Miyabi!” Touya shouted, rushing her way.

However, I immediately shouted, “Stop, Touya! Something’s there!”

That’s it. That’s what’s been giving me this uneasy feeling.

I spotted what looked like two slashes from a sword hanging in midair. My Danger Detection skill had picked them up and visualized them so I could see them. They were literally so dangerous that the skill visualized them for me.

“Fly, Agito.”

“JUMP, TOUYA!”

Touya and I leaped to either side as the frozen slashes suddenly shot forward, gouging the ground with their passage. If we had only been a beat slower in jumping... I did not want to finish the thought.

During this time, Rion had closed in on Miyabi. Upon landing on the ground, Miyabi had directed her ogre to charge forward, but when I looked up, it was already bisected at the waist, with a massive amount of magic gathering around the body.

“Mr. Ogre here is undead, right? Every time it hit me, it got a little bit weaker. Tough luck.”

“Dead End Crush!”

Miyabi’s Rank A Black Magic spell caused the magic around her ogre to explode, instantaneously filling the area with dark energy. In short, it was a suicide bombing attack. As the ogre was undead, it could be revived later, but the specific one she was using would need a long, long time. Even more so after the way she used it as a catalyst for Dead End Crush, which destroyed every last particle of its physical form.

However, Miyabi did not hesitate for even a second. She was probably sure that she couldn’t win without doing so.

“Did we get her?!”

“Touya, why would you say that?!”

I couldn’t help but call Touya out on a jinx so obvious that even I recognized it. I shouldn’t have bothered. It had made me look away for a few moments.

“I’m sorry to say this, but I would’ve been able to dodge that even without the jinx. If the flow of magic hadn’t been so obvious, it might have scratched me a little.”

Touya could not believe his eyes. “She’s...completely unharmed?!”

Miyabi was out of the fight. She was just being sent out of the barrier when I turned to look her way. To add insult to injury, there wasn’t so much as a spot of damage on Rion’s outfit. There was nothing I could say. To make matters worse, the frozen slashes from before now floated in the air around her. One, two, three...yeah, I

stopped counting after ten.

“Touya, I’ll create a path. Follow me.”

“Even if I tell you not to push yourself too far, you won’t listen, will you? All right, I’ll do my best.”

With Spirit of Wind’s support, my Agility was slightly higher than normal. Although it wasn’t anything drastic, I still drew some reassurance from it. *Okay, my job is to create a path for Touya. I’m sure Iron Cutting Authority can do it. It can. It must!*

“Thunderclap Edge.” The black swords in Rion’s hands suddenly took on a terrifying glow and roared with power.

Oh god... No, I have no time to hesitate! “Let’s go, Touya!”

“Right behind you!”

I charged forward, faster than wind, sharper than a blade. I was a shield that would not allow anything past.

Rion simply said, “Agito,” remaining where she was.

That single word caused her surroundings to burst into frenzied activity. The slashes rushed at me in a seemingly endless barrage, all efforts at concealment discarded as they announced their approach by shredding the floor of the training hall. The sight was so terrifying, so ridiculous, that I couldn’t help but laugh. Even so, I resolved not to let a single slash reach Touya.

I calmed myself and inhaled. Even in such a desperate situation, I could still hear my own breath loudly. *Good. I’m feeling good. I’m in top form.*

Kiiiiiin!

I sliced through the first wave of slashes with one swing enchanted with Iron Cutting Authority. It was heavy. It was unbelievably heavy, and I felt the shock of the impact reach the marrow of my bones. Even so, I had been right. I’d successfully bisected the attacks that had looked so terrifying and invincible.

The remnants flew past me on both sides, but I had no time to pay them any attention. Thanks to my long years of practice, my sword was already back in its sheath before I knew it. The second wave was almost on top of me. The shrill sound of metal on metal rang out once more, and pain further racked my body.

It’s still the second round and it’s already this bad? I feel like every swing of the sword exceeds my limit a little. Next wave... Oh no, the slashes are overlapping in an “X.” That doesn’t just double the power. Ha ha ha, fine! I’ll do it! Bring it on! I’ll exceed my limits! As many times as it takes!

Metallic screeches seemed to fill the air—no, the world.



Whoa, she’s actually cutting slashes of Agito made with Aklama. Even

Gramps barely manages to block those.

Rion was honestly surprised by the two remaining Heroes' charge. She had enchanted both swords she was holding with Thunderclap Edge, intending to finish the fight with a barrage of Agito. Once surprise and admiration passed, however, the time for analysis came.

The fact that she can cut down Agito means I probably shouldn't fight her directly using Aklama. Okay, so close-quarters combat is out of the question.

Throughout the fight, Rion was making notes on her observations through the Network. One reason was because Kelvin could no longer see the Heroes' Statuses using Analyze Eye due to one of them possessing Rank S Concealment. Therefore, Rion, as their opponent, was personally gauging their physical capabilities and deducing their skills by fighting them. Of course, that was only a secondary objective. When given a good opportunity to finish someone off, she would take it without mercy.

Ki!in! Ki!in! Ki!i!i!in!

It took only a split second for sixteen more Agito to storm past. Weathering them all was a nigh impossible feat, but Setsuna managed it. The way she cleaved through the fourfold slash at the end was a truly remarkable sight. She was sweating like a river and could no longer muster the strength to hold on to her sword. However, she had done it. She had stood at her limits again and again, pushing her boundaries each time, and remained standing at the end.

"Agito Kokurai."

However, Rion, as someone who had undergone all those training sessions with the Beast King, was not one who would let such an obvious moment of weakness pass by. Further destruction was unleashed from her hand, brutal and without mercy. One massive black strike to embody pure despair—an Agito generated with the sharpness and toughness of Aklama enchanted with Thunderclap Edge—fell upon Setsuna as if to mock all her efforts so far.

"Using Iron Cutting Authority...*now!*"

"What?!"

Setsuna was supposed to be tapped out. She couldn't lift an arm, couldn't take another step. She was exhausted beyond exhaustion. The words she managed to squeeze out through such bone-deep weariness, however, moved her body. She had been embarrassed to say the incantation out loud at the beginning, and now she had mastered the skill to the point where she no longer needed to say the words. However, her thoughts were given voice through those words, and those words pulled her body along. She no longer had the strength to hold her sword, so she swung her hand instead. It was a simple knife chop.

There was no sound when Setsuna's hand and Agito Kokurai made contact. The one that gave way was the latter. That was all there was to it.

"How's...that?"

"Magnetic Whip."

Rather than answering, Rion directed another attack at the girl who had just overcome her last trial—the girl who was losing consciousness even now.

"DIVINE SABEEEEEEER!!!"

Two swords intercepted Rion's attack in the nick of time. The hero of light stood up to the angel in black to protect his fallen companion.

"Looks like you're the only one left, Touya."

"It's time to end this."

Black swords wreathed in blue lightning, and Holy Swords clad in blinding light. One pair of each, one wielder of each. An instant later, blades and wielders clashed.



"That's the match over, looks like," I noted.

Gerard nodded. "Indeed."

The fight between Rion and the Heroes of Deramis was over. As for the result, well...

"Kel-nii, I won! Yay!"

It was Rion's overwhelming victory. My precious little sister had remained unhurt to the very end.

"Everyone, I'm so sorry! To think I was still so weak..."

"If you say that, Kanzaki-kun, then where does that leave me? I didn't even do anything..."

"Not true. Frozen Temple is still standing."

"Oh god, the muscle pain..."

I caught Rion as she leaped into my arms and patted her head while casting my thoughts over the last part of the match. The one on one between Rion and Touya had ended in a split second, but it must have felt like an eternity to Touya. Even I wasn't sure how many times their swords clashed within that second. I was pretty sure the number I counted from watching at a distance was off by quite a bit.

Considering how I didn't see Touya suffering from electrical damage, Divine Saber was probably a nullifying kind of spell—not that I was ruling out the possibility that it contained some other effect.

But the MVP of this match was, without a doubt, Setsuna. She had more than proven she truly had the authority to cut down everything in her way, not only managing to protect her companions to the very end, but even carving a path for Touya to reach Rion.

The other members of their party had also grown a lot. That said,

it was still too early for me to fight them myself. I clapped my hands twice to catch the Heroes' attention.

"All right, we're announcing our decision now."

"What decision? We lost." Touya looked downcast.

"It's good that you fought intending to win, but I never said that was the passing requirement. Even though Rion went easy on you guys, I still think you put up a pretty good fight."

"Wait, she..."

"Went easy..."

"On us?"

Noticing the stares, Rion laughed bashfully to gloss over the situation.

Wasn't it obvious from the roundabout way she fought? If Rion was actually serious, it would've been game over for you guys the moment the match began.

"So, Melfina, take it away. What's your judgment?"

"They have the bare minimum of strength needed. I believe each of them now has the ability to fight with Captain Cliff one-on-one."

Miyabi sat up. "With Captain Cliff?"

Oh? Why'd that get a reaction from Miyabi? Did her strange sense of rivalry get triggered again?

If he had been seated, Touya would have been on the edge of his seat. "Which means..."

"All of you have passed. For the peace of this world, please continue to work hard at your training."

Cheers shook the thoroughly torn-up training hall.

Good, good. Continue working hard. I'm praying for your growth from the bottom of my heart.



"Here are towels and a change of clothes."

"Thank you, Efil-san."

After being acknowledged by Kelvin through the test, the Heroes ended up staying the night at his house—as did Colette. It was decided at the drop of a hat as if they weren't all extremely important figures in Deramis, but since the person with the second-highest authority in the country said it was fine, there was clearly no problem. Colette, of course, would never refuse an invitation from Melfina. Consequently, she gave her permission to the group without a second thought.

Since they had gotten all sweaty after the practice match, the first thing Setsuna and the girls did was head to the bath. As a precaution, Touya was being kept under strict watch until they came back out.

"Wow, I thought the house looked big from the outside," Setsuna marveled, "but it feels even more spacious inside. This changing room

is enormous.”

Efil smiled. “Master and Rion-sama both take their baths very seriously. They took extra care in expanding the bathing facilities.”

Setsuna’s eyes widened when she noticed the clothing that had been prepared. “It’s a yukata! Girls, they have yukatas!” she exclaimed, prompting gasps of appreciation from her companions.

They all reached for the outfits to feel their nostalgic texture.

“I took the liberty of preparing them, as I recalled how much you appreciated floor cushions and tatami mat flooring when we last met. This is sleepwear sourced from Toraj. I hope you don’t mind wearing the same, Colette-sama?”

“Oh no, not at all. Thank you, Efil-san.”

“I am relieved to hear that. In that case, I will excuse myself now. Please take your time, everyone.”

After seeing Efil off, the group from Deramis took off their clothes and quickly hurried to the bathing area. When they opened the door, however, they froze in astonishment.

Miyabi had only one word to say: “Huge.”

“The one in the Palace of Deramis was impressive, but this...”
Setsuna’s mouth hung open.

Nana’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “Is... Is this a hot spring?”

Baths of all kinds and sizes—some made with wood, some with stone—filled the girls’ field of view. Even though they were indoors, plants filled the space in a way that gave the impression that they were outdoors. The clincher was the milky-white bathwater, which added a pleasant hint to the aroma of the various types of wood that had been used to build the baths.

“A *Japanese* hot spring, at that...” Setsuna was in the middle of agreeing with Nana when a voice suddenly spoke up from behind them.

“Kelvin improved on this place again and again, with the cooperation of the Queen of Toraj, no less! Then Dahak joined us and the scenery became even nicer!”

“What?!” Nana whirled around in surprise to see Sera standing there with nothing on but a towel. Although her important parts were properly hidden, there was no hiding her exceptional body shape.

“Huge...” Miyabi said again.

“So it is! So it is!” Sera smiled smugly, looking as proud as if she had been praised. There was a misunderstanding here, but no one had the heart to point it out.

“You’re too fast at getting ready, Sera-neeeee!”

“Why the rush? It’s not like the bath will run away.”

Rion and Ange also popped in. Because they were wearing exactly what Sera was wearing, Colette immediately clapped both hands over

her mouth. After this point, she fell very silent, but there'd be no end to it if we commented on every one of her episodes, so we'll skip over that part.

"Oh, it's Secchan, Nacchan, and Micchan!" Rion smiled and waved her hands. "You guys put up a pretty good fight earlier!"

"Thank you for fighting us, Rion-chan," Setsuna replied. "It was our complete loss."

"Don't be misled by appearances. Lesson learned," Miyabi added.

"Aha ha, I was trained by Gramps and the Beast King, after all. I can't lose that easily!"

"The Beast King?" someone asked, but Rion started pushing everyone forward.

"Come on, let's not stand around!"

The group finally settled into the baths.

"Phew..."

"It's a hot spring. It's an actual hot spring!"

There was no better illustration of the phrase "overcome with emotion" than this scene. Setsuna and Nana both seemed to melt into the water, and even the usually expressionless Miyabi closed her eyes halfway in a clear expression of enjoyment.

"But how come there's a hot spring in the house? Are there hot water pockets underneath Parth like there are in Toraj?" Setsuna asked in wonder.

"Mel-san made this water using Blue Magic," Ange replied.

"Apparently, Kelvin tried to dig underground, but it didn't go well, so they went with this instead. I was also really surprised when I saw this place for the first time."

Miyabi turned around, her eyes dead serious. "Nana, learn that spell. You must."

"Whaaaat? I... I don't know if I can..." Nana protested weakly.

"The water has healing properties, so it doesn't just feel good, it's pretty useful too," Ange added, casting a look over the group.

Setsuna raised her arms a few times gingerly. "Now that you mention it, my muscle soreness is almost gone."

"If you learn the spell, you'll be able to take a dip every day. The spell's only Rank B, so it's easy," Sera said offhandedly. "I'm sure Mel wouldn't mind showing you how to cast it."

"Um, for most people, Rank B spells are considered difficult for even experienced mages," Nana replied wryly.



“That might be true for normal people,” Ange interjected, “but if you can’t easily handle something of this level, you’re gonna have a tough time going forward. You’ve gotta at least get strong enough to beat Rion-chan four-on-one.”

“Beat Rion-chan...” Nana mouthed the words as if she had trouble comprehending them.

“Hey, I’m in the same position,” Rion laughed. “I’ve gotta get strong enough to get a win against Sera-nee and An-nee too!” She clenched a fist, indicating her renewed motivation.

The Heroes all seemed to freeze, despite being submerged in a hot spring.

“Um, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but...Rion-chan, are you saying you can’t beat Sera-san and Ange-san?” Setsuna asked apprehensively.

At the same time, Miyabi looked into the distance, despair in her eyes. “That pitch-black angel...losing?”

“Aha ha, I’m totally on a losing streak,” Rion admitted with embarrassment. “If I fight with Alex at my side, then *maybe* we can win?”

“Hmph! I’ll still win!” Sera declared emphatically.

“We can’t let go of our positions as her big sisters just yet!” Ange chuckled.

The Heroes had never felt the phrase “there is always someone better” more keenly than in that moment. Oblivious to their states of mind, however, the ironfisted empress and head-chopping assassin switched topics and happily started talking about that night’s dinner menu.



At the same time, Kelvin was showing Touya one of the guest rooms.

“So, this is gonna be your room. What do you think?”

“But this... It’s a Japanese room! The floor’s tatami! And that’s a futon!”

Here, too, the atmosphere was charged with excitement, but for different reasons from those at the bath.

“I have connections in Toraj. That’s where I sourced all this stuff. So will this room do?”

“Oh, yes, please! I love this room! I feel like I’m staying at a Japanese inn!”

“Ooookay, glad you like it.”

As it turned out, the Heroes all preferred futons over beds.

“Well, stay here and rest up until the girls are done. When it’s

time, one of my servants will come fetch you.”

“Okay! Um, Teacher...are we returning to Deramis tomorrow?”

“Yep, we’ll be using the teleportation gate first thing in the morning.”

“Then you’ll start our training, right?! So we can get strong enough to beat the enemies we’re fighting?! WHOO, I’m so ready for it!”

“It’s...good you’re motivated.”

Kelvin drew back a little at the over-the-top enthusiasm. He was quite busy at the moment, having many things he wanted to look into. Therefore, despite the boy’s excitement, the plan this time was to throw the Heroes into a dungeon—*the* hardest one in Deramis—and leave them to fend for themselves.

That said, there was one thing Kelvin needed to confirm immediately.

“Just asking, but Touya, you’ve never peeked at a girl bathing before, right?”

“Of course not! I mean, there are more instances than I can count when it happened by accident, but I’ve never done it on purpose!”

“Is that so! That’s all I needed to hear. If you get close to the bath area without permission, you can consider your life forfeit. More like, I’m assigning someone to watch you! I won’t allow such accidents to happen under my roof!”

“Huh? What’re you talking about, Teacher?”

As always, Touya was his usual oblivious self in regards to the characteristics he’d had since well before coming to this world. Kelvin realized once again that he could never be too careful around this protagonist.

Chapter 4: The Catacombs of Heroic Spirits

I was glad to see that a touch of nostalgic Japanese culture had done wonders for rejuvenating the Heroes. The sashimi we had for dinner—caught by Sera and prepared by Efil—received rave reviews.

Yep, you really do need soy sauce for sashimi. I'm so glad I bought some from Toraj. Thank you for developing it, Toraji (if that's your name)!

In sharp contrast with the Heroes, I was absolutely exhausted due to having kept my guard up the entire time against Touya's protagonist disposition. You couldn't believe how tired I was. But I did it. With Gerard's cooperation, not a single accident happened on our watch. Our battle was legendary.

The next day, as planned, we set off and returned to Deramis through the teleportation gate. Originally, I'd intended on hardening my heart and throwing Touya and the rest into the most dangerous dungeon in Deramis with nothing but the bare minimum of support so that I could fully apply myself to investigating the Apostles. Unfortunately, the situation did not allow for this—although not due to any sort of protest from the Deramisian brass going, "We can't put the Heroes in such danger!" In fact, Colette gave her permission without batting an eye—religious fanatics really were scary. Rather, it was because a visitor brought us news.

"The children from Lifil Orphanage were kidnapped?!"

"Yes, Oracle. But we're still trying to keep it under wraps for now..."

The person who delivered the alarming news was none other than Cardinal Sai. According to his account, early this morning, a holy knight on patrol was passing by the orphanage when he noticed that something was off.

"Since Captain Cliff was absent, the man came to consult me instead, what with me being the previous knight captain. He said the children are usually playing around boisterously at that time of day, but the place was dead quiet this morning. So he went inside to investigate and found Sister Marigan unconscious on the ground, likely having been knocked out using magic. Thankfully, she had no injuries, but we're still healing her at the moment while taking her statement. The other nuns and the children were all gone. Instead, he found this."

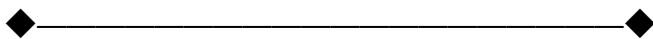
Cardinal Sai handed Colette an envelope. The sender was unmarked, and it had been carelessly thrown onto the table right next to where Sister Marigan had been lying.

“A letter?” Colette asked as she pulled out the sheet of paper within and began perusing the contents.

Seeing the look on her face growing graver by the moment, I asked, “What’s it say, Colette?” *Considering the situation, it can’t be anything good. It’s just a matter of how bad things are.*

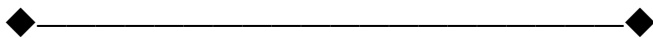
“Please...here, read it for yourself.”

“Let’s see...”



To the Oracle and Heroes of Deramis:

Come to the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits by twilight. If you don’t, the souls of these poor children who placed their faith in you will be released. The time to rise up is upon us. It is time to proclaim the true Goddess.



This was all that was written. I had no idea where these Catacombs of Heroic Spirits were, but I got the message that whoever had kidnapped the children was waiting there. The worst part was where it insinuated that the kidnappers would kill all the hostages if Colette did not come to this place in person. I couldn’t tell if it was a move by the Apostles. It would have to be someone pretty close to Colette to know her relationship with those in the orphanage, though.

“Oracle, this is difficult for me to say, but...”

“I give you permission. Speak.”

There wasn’t the slightest hint of hesitation in Colette’s words. Right now, she was one hundred percent the Oracle.

“It appears the anti-Melfina faction, the one worshipping Elearis, which has been moving in the shadows all this time, has finally sprung into action with this incident serving as the trigger. I’ve already sent word to Pope Philip, but still, please remain vigilant even when in the city. Anyone you know could be an enemy.”

Cardinal Sai was not lying. As I’d noted before, Deramis was not a monolith. When Melfina became the Goddess of Reincarnation, the Oracle of the previous goddess, Elearis, had caused an uprising with her believers chasing an ideal. Embers of that fire still smoldered to this day, kept alive by descendants of those who had kept the faith. Even if their numbers only made up a small percentage of the entire body of Rinne adherents, it still posed a huge menace. After all, there was no telling what they would do if they saw this as an opportunity.

“The Elearis faction has shown itself, you say. All right, I understand. So, what is the current situation?”

“Embarrassingly, they’ve occupied the entrance to the catacombs. They were already taking action when I received word and succeeded due to several holy knights and soldiers who were stationed in the palace turning traitor. Fighting hasn’t broken out yet, as Pope Philip expressly forbade it, so the two sides are simply glaring at each other over a barricade. The Elearis believers seem entirely uninterested in dialogue. Cardinal Marcel is trying to talk with them now, but there’s no telling how the situation will develop.”

“So bringing Cliff with me in my magic pool made the situation worse...”

In other words, there were Elearis believers among the holy knights and believers too. Wow, they’re more numerous than I’d thought. But wait, “in the palace”?

“Colette-chan, are these Catacombs of Heroic Spirits underneath the Great Cathedral?” Shutola asked with perfect timing.

I took the opportunity to chime in. “I want to know too. What are they, anyway? ‘Catacombs’ is in the name, so it’s an underground mass cemetery?”

“Well, I haven’t actually told the Heroes yet, but I suppose this is as good a time as any,” Colette said, standing up to peek through the window at the Great Cathedral. “There are two dungeons in this city. One is the Training Grounds of the Guardians—as you can tell by the name, it’s used as a place of training. It’s Rank C and is mainly for newly summoned Heroes and holy knights.”

“Ah, I remember it,” Touya said. “It’s that tall one that’s visible over there, right? Boy, the memori—”

“Sh!” Setsuna landed a sharp jab in his ribs with an elbow. “Not now!”

“Oof!”

“Sorry, Colette. Go on.”

The term “training ground” really does pique my interest, but it’s the other place that seems to be the main topic right now. Let’s make a note to ask more about the Training Grounds of the Guardians another time.

“Ahem. The other dungeon is called the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits and is deep, deep underneath the Great Cathedral of Deramis. It’s a massive crypt with ten floors, built during the age of the Great War to honor those who gave their lives on the battlefield. Due to the powerful spirits of malice that roam the place, it was classified as a dungeon.”

A cemetery underneath the Great Cathedral. Ah, maybe the whole thing about gathering magic at the center of the city isn’t only to bolster the abilities of the Oracle, but also to purify and pacify the spirits in this place.

“Whoa, and these Elearis believers are barricading themselves in there?” Dahak asked incredulously.

“The strength of the spirits differs drastically by floor, so I suspect they’re staying on the higher floors. The holy knights and clergy both work hard to keep the first two floors safe enough to be used as a normal cemetery. However, the danger increases exponentially the deeper down you go. There might even be a Rank S monster at the lowest level. What’s more, it turns into a labyrinth starting on the third floor and is incredibly expansive. It’s basically shaped like one huge rhombus. To be honest, even I don’t have a clear idea of the layout of floors seven and lower.”

“Why was it made that way?”

“I’ve been told that the lowest levels were made to entomb popes and Oracles. The layout was meant to prevent anyone from getting to them. The variety of traps also shoots up starting from the middle floors.”

I guess it’s the same as protecting the bodies of kings in booby-trapped pyramids. I can’t imagine the Elearis believers easily getting through such measures, but they did specifically choose the place. I’m sure they have something in mind.

Just in case, I asked through the Network, *Sera, Ange, can your detection abilities reach the Great Cathedral from here?*

::Mm...sort of,:: Sera replied. ::I can tell that the nuns and children have been split up across several floors, but I’d have to get closer to find out more::

Ange agreed. ::That’s what I’m getting too. Oh, and I can sense someone on the deepest level::

Oh? So they have someone capable of getting to the end of the dungeon with women and children in tow. Interesting..



We needed to take urgent action. Personally, I was just itching to charge right in, but the other side did have hostages. I had no choice but to control myself.

“Wow, they sure got us good! I never thought the Elearis faction would take such extreme measures, ha ha. What should we do?” Pope Philip laughed like a child caught in a prank trying to gloss things over.

“Your Holiness, Kelvin-sama and the Heroes are present. Please take this seriously,” Cardinal Sai said in a chiding tone.

“Aw, Sai! Why do you and Colette both act so cold with me?!”

“That’s hardly the issue now, Your Holiness! The lives of the children are on the line!”

“Okay, Colette, there’s no need to be so intense just because

Melfina-sama is here.”

“What?! I...I’m just—”

Ah, he hit the bull’s-eye. No, I’m sure she’s actually worried about those from the orphanage; considering her history with them, maybe more so than anyone else in this room. It’s just that when it comes to Melfina, she tends to overreact a lot. Please forgive her.

“However, Your Holiness, your flippant attitude might negatively affect the Heroes’ morale. Please—”

“C’mon, Sai. You were a Hero too once. We were in the same party and all. We even fell in love with Serge together. I’m sure we count as friends, don’t we? I know you, ‘prince of a fallen country,’ ha ha!”

“Oh yes, we were close enough to fall in love together. We even had our hearts dashed, yes?”

“Ah, I’m sorry. No, Sai, that smile you make is scaring me!”

Oh, is his previous love life a sore point for Cardinal Sai?

We were in the middle of a strategy meeting. Those present included my party, the Heroes, Colette, Cliff, Philip, and Sai. We were all sitting around a round table and were supposed to be talking about how to handle the hostage situation, but the direction of the discussion was veering off track, and it was mainly the pope’s fault.

“Philip, have you joked around enough yet?” Melfina cut in. “I will remind you that we do have a time limit: twilight.”

“Okaaay. I’ll get serious,” Philip replied, drawing his words out.

So, he listens to you, Melfina. How do I put this? It’s like... It’s like you’re the mother of a problem child.

::If you’re the father, then I wouldn’t be against it, honey. In Philip’s case, however, he’s partly acting this way on purpose. It’s when he seems to be messing around the most that he’s thinking the hardest.::

Even though this is a meeting where we’re all supposed to be thinking of a solution together?

::Well...all right, maybe it’s at something close to a two-to-one ratio.::

Wait, which side is two and which side is one? Don’t tell me, is he using more than half of his brainpower on messing around? Isn’t he supposed to be a saint?!

Suddenly, Philip’s facial expression changed. “Well then, let’s sum up where we are. The Elearis faction’s demand is for Colette and the Heroes to go to the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits. It’s written on this note that they’ll kill the hostages at twilight if we don’t hurry, but honestly, I don’t think that’s their real aim.”

“What makes you think so, Your Holiness?”

“I told you to call me ‘father,’ Colette! As for my reasoning,

remember that these guys have lain low since the position of goddess of this world went to Melfina-sama. I can't imagine them suddenly being brazen enough to all come out of the woodwork just because they took a few orphans and nuns hostage. For all they know, I could send the knights charging in, not caring if the hostages died or not."

The pope waved the letter from the kidnappers nonchalantly in the air. The words he said sounded all the crueller for his young face, but the same was true in the modern world. No matter how many of a country's citizens were captured by a terrorist group, there was no way the head of state would go out to meet the group in person. Depending on the country, it might even deploy its forces to completely wipe out the group in question.

"Also, it bothers me how they're asking for not only Colette, but the Heroes too," he continued. "I can't see why they're inviting a group of fighters who rank near the top of the country into their camp. Do they think they can overwhelm them with sheer numbers? It's like they're broadcasting that they've got something else in mind. Or I should say, it's like they've got *someone* else with them."

The first word that came to mind left my lips. "The Apostles?"

Philip shrugged. "Based on the information that you and Melfina-sama brought back, and considering the timing, I think that seems like a reasonable conclusion to make. An Apostle joining their side makes for more than enough reason to suddenly spring into action. Who knows? Maybe the act of sending this letter was purely for raising their morale; it could just be a bluff to reassure the rest of their group that, with the strength of an Apostle on their side, they now have enough fighting strength to overwhelm even the Heroes. The letter indirectly refers to the resurrection of Elearis-sama, so I'm certain the believers are working on something else. Clearly, these Apostles really do like pulling the strings from the shadows."

Seeing how smoothly Philip put our situation into perspective and produced inferences one after another, I heaved an inward sigh of relief, realizing that he had only been playing around as a joke and was actually thinking seriously. He probably did not intend for it to happen, but the former Apostle with us, Ange, was averting her gaze, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"In that case, there's only one thing they can be after," Cardinal Sai said.

Philip nodded. "That's what I think too."

Colette looked mystified. "What would that be, Your Holiness?"

"What else but the thing sealed on the deepest floor, my daughter?"

"The thing...sealed on the deepest floor? But the only things on the lowest floor are the graves of past popes and Oracles..."

So even Colette doesn't know? I mean, it's not like I do either.

"Ah, I guess we never told you. Truth is, there's something else down there. Right, Melfina-sama?"

"I'm afraid I cannot answer you in this artificial body."

"Oh, so you can't say it? May I say it, then? Only Sai and I know at the moment."

"You plan on saying it with or without my permission, don't you?" Melfina sighed. "Considering what's coming, it's probably best. Yes, go ahead."

Something that's serious enough to trigger Divine Binding? What can it be?

"In the deepest part of those catacombs is Elearis-sama's beloved weapon, Holy Lance Eclipse. Although it's no longer as powerful as the legends say, if it falls into the hands of one of her Apostles, there's no telling what would happen."

"Isn't that a huge problem?!" Colette cried.

"Now, now, there's no need to get so worked up. We did install a whole bunch of barriers and traps around the place. No matter how strong this Apostle is, they'd still have a tough time getting through everything. After all, I'm the one who designed the catacombs and they're so convoluted that even I've forgotten the correct path and how to disable everything. Aha ha, I went a bit overboard!"

Dude.

"Your Holiness, that's not something to brag about."

"Hey, it was centuries ago. And we destroyed all the blueprints and everything. How am I supposed to remember it all?"

"I still remember it all."

"Wh— Are you a genius, Sai?!"

That surprised face looks really affected.

"To add to what His Holiness said, the weapon itself is protected by a barrier that was erected by the Oracle of the era. I'm sure it is enough to at least buy us some time."

"Yep, yep, what Sai said. So then, Kelvin-kun, do you have any good ideas? Preferably one that doesn't involve putting Colette in danger, please. Because if Melfina-sama asks, I'm sure she'll say yes without a second thought. She'd probably even walk through the streets naked if the order came from the goddess herself."

"Of course I would!"

Colette, couldn't you have at least denied that part?

I racked my brain, mumbling, "A good idea..."

The quick and dirty way would be to destroy the entire dungeon in one go with magic and draw out the mastermind that way. But the Great Cathedral would be destroyed too as collateral, and I figure that would be a problem. Plus, they have hosta— Hold on. We encountered the same

situation back in Toraj, didn't we?

"I suppose I do have an idea," I said slowly. "I'd need your cooperation, though."

"Sure. Just say the word!" Philip replied casually.

"Whatever lofty scheme it is that Kelvin-sama has thought up ought to be followed without question!" Colette cried with conviction. "Tell us what to do!"

Sai chided the two of them. "At least listen to Kelvin-sama's plan first before agreeing."

Aren't this pope and Oracle a little too quick to agree to things?



The heart of Deramis, the Great Cathedral, was currently enveloped in the greatest commotion it had seen since its construction. The underground area that served as the entrance to the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits, which were usually heavily guarded and accessible only to those with permission, was now sealed with a barricade. Behind that barricade stood ranks of holy knights and soldiers bracing themselves behind large shields, and at the very back was a man in a cleric outfit who was barking orders while pressing one hand to his ear.

On the other side of that barricade, the cardinal with a red stole, Marcel Gottes, shouted, "Such action makes the heavens weep, my children. You must remove these barriers immediately and open the way. The goddess we worship might be different, but if you repent your ways now—"

"Then what? Melfina-sama would forgive us? We're tired of hearing such trite lines now! Our demands are the Oracle and the Heroes. Time is running out! If you really care about the missing lambs, you will bring those five here now!"

"Hear, hear! You're the traitors for betraying Elearis-sama!"

"Go home! You have no place here!"

Marcel had been earnestly trying to speak with the other side ever since the commotion broke out, but his words were clearly falling on deaf ears. All that he got back were insults. As he was a first-rate White Mage, he had also been maintaining a barrier to protect against surprise attacks. Exhaustion was heavy on his face.

A holy knight suddenly ran in and whispered in Marcel's ear. "Cardinal Marcel, Colette-sama is coming soon."

"What?! Is that true?!" the other man exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, Your Excellency. This information came from Cardinal Sai and Captain Cliff, so it should be reliable."

"Colette-sama is really coming?"

The news spread among the ranks like a wave, creating a

significant stir. It didn't take long for the Elearis believers to notice that something had changed. The man who had been giving orders, the commander, asked a nearby subordinate, "What's happening?"

"They suddenly started to get worked up about something. I guess something's happened?"

"And I'm asking you what that something is! Do we not have anyone with the Overhear skill?!"

"I-I'll go check!"

Just like Marcel's side, the Elearis believers also burst into activity. It was only a matter of time before they, too, learned of Colette's coming arrival. However, they were not alone—there was a third side that was also starting to move.

Two figures perched on the roof of the Training Grounds of the Guardians were currently peering into the Great Cathedral through a window. They were so high up that someone on the ground would have had trouble making them out against the detail of the structure. This tower was a dungeon, and naturally, it contained numerous monsters.

No, a correction was in order. It *used* to contain monsters. Every single floor from the ground level to where these observers stood was filled only with tiny fragments, some as small as dust motes, of what used to be monsters. Not a single actual monster remained.

::Movement confirmed on both sides. The news about Colette-sama seems to be spreading::

Good. Everyone, go.



Huh? What's with the commotion outside? thought the woman wearing a nun's habit, hiding in the shadows of the long, long spiral staircase leading from the Great Cathedral to the catacombs. She had served the Holy Order of Rinne for the past five years but secretly worshipped Elearis. She had started this day like any other, but as soon as her companions informed her that the uprising had begun, she had dropped everything and hurried to join them, bringing nothing but the clothes on her back. Currently, she had a transceiver in her ear and was watching for any intruders or signs of trouble.

"Ack!"

"Kay, that's one down."

Unfortunately for the woman, she had been stationed too close to the entrance, and she had been alone. In a way, it had also been unfortunate that she was a woman. In any case, she suddenly found herself choked by a black-hooded figure who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Everything had happened so fast that she had not even had time to scream. The hold was performed with the

perfect amount of strength, bringing her to the fine line where she was only barely able to breathe.

“We sure are lucky! This woman also has the transceiver thing the previous one had! Go me!”

A woman with fiery red hair, dressed in a military uniform, came into the nun’s fading view, chatting cheerfully. She, too, had appeared without any warning whatsoever.

“I’m glad we’re doing this together, Sera-san. If I’d been by myself, I’d probably have had to off quite a lot of them before I got lucky. Can you maybe share some of that luck with me?”

“You’re plenty happy, aren’t you, Ange? They say that if you ask for too much, it’ll ruin you. Then again, I guess Kelvin’s someone who asks regardless!”

Her two assailants chatted nonchalantly, seemingly not paying any mind to the nun who was teetering on the verge of life and death. However, she was shuddering with alarm inside. Many terms she’d just heard were blaring in her head. *Offing people? Does that mean what I think it means? And they mentioned the names of Grim Reaper and Empress!*

“A—” Just as the nun was about to clench her abdomen to scream a warning to her companions, however...

“Oh right, I forgot—we’re short on time too.” The red-haired woman took the transceiver from the nun’s ear and examined it curiously, holding it up to the light and turning it every which way.

“I’m sorry if it hurts a little,” the black-hooded figure whispered. “We just have a few questions for you. Will you answer them? And don’t bother trying to raise your voice; I can tell when you’re about to do it from your breathing.” Although her voice was kind, it also contained a razor edge that brooked no argument.

Right after that, the woman found the pressure around her neck loosening. *What’s this?* she thought. *Is this my cue to talk? Talk about...what, though? No, I am a servant of the true goddess. I cannot—I won’t betray her.*

The nun shored up her resolve and opened her mouth for one final act of defiance.

“Like the Grim Reaper you serve, go to h—”

The pressure around the nun’s neck returned, cutting her off midsentence.

“How was that?” the redhead asked.

“Good enough. Now I can imitate her voice.”

The nun felt her consciousness fading more and more.

“Okay.” The redhead turned to the nun. “It’s all right; you don’t have to speak if you don’t want to. We’ll get it out of you either way.” The tip of her index finger seemed to become stained in red. This was

the last thing that the nun remembered.

“Ah, ah, ahhh... How is it? Do I sound like her now?” The black-hooded person, Ange, tried a few lines in a perfect imitation of the unconscious nun’s voice.

“It’s perfect, Ange! You’re so good at so many things!”

“You’d be surprised by what I picked up to make my missions go easier. And voice imitation is actually pretty easy; with enough practice, I’m sure even you could copy any woman’s voi— Wait a moment. Uh, it’s a bit late to ask this, but was there a need for me to do all this? Couldn’t you have just made her say whatever we wanted using Blood Dominion?”

“Well, about that...” Sera turned to the nun, who now had a dab of Sera’s blood on her forehead, and crooked a finger.

Immediately, the woman leaped to her feet and, with a sharp salute, said, “Awaiting your orders, Sera-sama!” Then she remained stock-still, almost as if she were a well-trained soldier and not a nun.

“For some reason, they all turn out like this. Some more, some less. It’s great that they give me whatever information I want, but they do stop acting like themselves. Blood Dominion isn’t great for making people act things out.”

“What?! I thought you were the one ordering them to behave that way!”

“I’m not! I will admit it makes me feel good, though.”

“I...see...”

Perhaps Sera had made them act that way unconsciously. Interestingly, the greater the difference in fighting strength between Sera and her target, the more pronounced the phenomenon was.

“Okay then. First, tell us everything you know about Elearis, the Apostles, and the opposition faction! And Ange, you watch the time and do what you need to do!”

“Mm-kay! I’ll check the Network to watch the info you upload, Sera-san. But before that, can you start by asking this woman how to use the transceiver?” Ange asked, putting on the gadget she had seized from the nun.



“The Oracle is really here!”

“And the Heroes too!”

The Great Cathedral was enveloped in a commotion, with those on both sides of the barricade in a fluster. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the figure slowly walking through the great doors that led to the underground area. Cardinal Sai and Captain Cliff—both with swords on their hips—flanked Colette as the Heroes of Deramis followed behind them. When she passed Cardinal Marcel, Colette stood still and

closed her eyes. The place fell silent.

“As demanded, the Oracle is here!” Cliff shouted. “Now, you will return to us the hostages from the orphanage!”

The commander of the Elearis believers started and hurriedly tried to regain his composure. “H-Hah! Didn’t think you’d actually come, Oracle!”

Colette remained silent and kept her eyes closed. Cardinal Sai took one step forward to speak in her stead.

“Look how you’ve fallen, Archbishop Richard. How do you imagine this situation is going to play out?”

“What an *honor* it is to be blessed by your presence, Cardinal Sai. The surprises continue, I see. However, we only asked for the Oracle and the Heroes. We have no use for you.” Richard let out a bark of laughter. “But if you want an answer so badly, we’ll tell you how this will go down. Whether you actually get the children back or not is entirely at our discretion! So first, O ‘esteemed Heroes,’ disarm yourselves fully! No weapons and no armor! And unrelated parties, back off!”

“Are...you sure you want to go through with this?” Sai asked.

“They’re still free to say no,” Richard sneered. “It’s just that if they do, it would mean the Oracle and Heroes chosen by Melfina decided to abandon the poor lost lambs out of love for their own lives! The true goddess is Elearis-sama after all!”

The logic and the claims that Richard was shouting were ridiculous and nonsensical. What made it worse was that he seemed entirely convinced of every last word. Both Sai and Cliff grimaced, understanding that this situation could not be resolved through discussion.

“Captain Cliff, don’t worry about us,” Touya said, stepping forward. “We promise we’ll protect Colette.”

“Even unarmed, we won’t lose to such riffraff,” Setsuna added, close on Touya’s heels with Miyabi and Nana.

“You guys...” Cliff watched helplessly as Colette walked forward, surrounded by the four Heroes with one on each side.

“Heh heh heh. Welcome, Oracle. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you in person.”

Just like before, however, Colette remained silent and composed.

“Oh, you don’t deign to speak to someone like me? No matter. Heroes, don’t you even think of doing anything funny. Not if you value the lives of the children, that is.”

“Ugh...” Setsuna gritted her teeth.

Delighted by the sight, Richard lifted a finger to press a switch on the transceiver in his ear.

“We have the Oracle and Heroes in custody. We’re sending them

in now. Hurry with the preparations...”

After Richard finished giving his instructions through the transceiver, he looked back up at Colette. The blank looks of disbelief on the faces of all the holy knights and soldiers around her gave him an adrenaline rush.

Rue your foolishness in worshipping a false goddess! he thought gleefully.

“Now, it’s time—”

BANG!

“Uh...what?”

Richard was interrupted by an explosion in his ear that seemed similar to a balloon popping. A beat later, his other ear picked up what sounded like glass shattering. Then, he was racked by an indescribable pain.

“AH, ARRRGHHHHHHH!!!”

His left ear was in absolute agony. It was hot. It was on fire. The agony was such that he clapped both his hands over his ear and fell to his knees. Then, he noticed something. He realized that his entire ear had been blown right off.

“M-My eeeeeaaaarr!”

He scrambled across the ground now made slippery with blood, reaching for the severed ear. However, someone else got to it before him. He looked up to see the subordinate who had been taking orders from him a moment ago now looking down at him. In his bloodstained hand was the ear with the transceiver still plugged in.

“You! Hand that over! That’s... That’s my... My...”

Richard trailed off as he noticed that blood was not only dripping from the man’s hand, but from his forehead as well. His eyes were blank and unfocused, whereas his motions were jerky and awkward. Completely bewildered, Richard looked around and found all his allies now looking at him with the same glassy stare, blood dripping down their foreheads.

“Thanks for making the call,” a woman’s voice said from behind. “We’ll make sure to send *this* Colette down without fail.”

Then, Richard’s field of view turned red and he was reduced to a mere puppet, an existence who lived solely to provide all the information he held as an archbishop and to serve as a guide into the catacombs. Depending on one’s perspective, this was perhaps not a reduction in his station in life but an elevation, although that is up to personal interpretation.

“Thanks for waiting! All done here!”

“Sera-san!”

The Heroes rushed over happily, praise on their lips, as the soldiers and Marcel, who could not comprehend what had just

happened, simply looked on in bafflement.

To go back a little, to when Richard was talking into his transceiver, Sera had already begun devastating his forces. She had suddenly appeared from the entrance of the spiral staircase that led down into the dungeon—basically, from the back of the Elearis believers' side—and made short work of them.

Of course, even if she had attacked them from the front, there was nothing they could have done to prevent their demise. The reason the soldiers and knights were staring with disbelief was not because they were stricken by regret, but because of how one-sidedly Sera had finished off the opposition forces while Richard was still on the transceiver.

Suddenly, Kelvin and Efil seemed to appear out of thin air.

“Heyyy, glad to see it went well.”

“It was an easy shot.”

“Kelvin-sama?!” Cardinal Marcel and the knights found themselves bewildered once more.

However, Kelvin paid them no mind. He simply walked through the path created by the ranks of kneeling Elearis believers, followed by Efil.

“Um, Captain Cliff, what’s going on?” Marcel asked.

Cliff smiled wryly. “I...can’t really explain this fully either, but...let’s just say this is just how powerful Rank S adventurers are.”

“I...see...”

Truth be told, even Cliff wasn’t sure he fully understood what had happened. All he could say was that he was witnessing a power beyond what even the Heroes had achieved. Without intending to, the part of him that was a soldier could not help but compare himself against the greats, a group in his mind that included Cardinal Sai, Pope Philip, and now Kelvin’s party.

::Ange here. I’m done eliminating the lookouts in the staircase. I’ll use the transceiver I picked up to clear the way for you guys through the first floor.::

Noted, Kelvin replied. Guess having you phase through and then Summoning Sera at your location was a good idea after all.

What had happened was that Kelvin, from his vantage point of the Great Cathedral, had sent Ange in first. Ange had used Uncontainable to phase through the walls and proceed directly inside. Based on her report of the interior layout, Kelvin had Summoned Sera directly into the underground staircase, after which the two had seized control of the area in the blink of an eye. They waited for Richard to report to the forces on the lower floors that he had Colette and the Heroes in hand. When he was done, Efil had sniped him through one of the cathedral’s windows. Now that they had one of the enemy’s

transceivers, Kelvin was going to take on the role of guiding the “prisoners” down.

According to what Sera and Ange picked up, the hostages are pretty scattered. Let’s get as close as we can.

::Want me to use Hades’s Sanguine Army to create you an army of skeletons, Kelvin?::

Nah, let’s at least make an effort to be covert. We might hear useful information along the way. However, when the enemy finds us out and dies, feel free to do whatever you want with their bodies.

::Okaaaay::

A rather alarming conversation was taking place through the Network, but because only those within the party could hear it, there was no problem whatsoever, even though they were now in a holy place.

Kelvin turned towards the Oracle, who still had yet to say a single word. “Well then. This is going to be your first real fight. Remember to use whatever you can, all right?”

The girl nodded in acknowledgment and gave him a smile that seemed to make her look younger and more adorable somehow.



At the bottom of the spiral staircase was the most dangerous dungeon in all of Deramis: the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits. That said, the top two floors were entirely free of monsters, the very picture of tranquility. There was a lot of space, however, as certified by Pope Philip. The first floor had a ceiling so high up it might as well have been the sky, whereas the ground was a grass plain stretching as far as the eye could see, dotted with marble tombstones here and there. The Elearis believers had set up camp in the middle of this space, waiting for the arrival of the Oracle and the Heroes of Deramis.

“Roger that. We’ll be ready to receive them.” One of the leaders lowered his hand from his ear after receiving a notification from Archbishop Richard. “Brothers and sisters, rejoice! Our fellow brother, Richard, has managed to apprehend the Oracle and Heroes. They’re being escorted down as we speak.”

Cheers rang out over the grassy plain. Their victory was assured the moment their targets entered the dungeon. The Oracle’s Summoning and the Heroes’ abilities were indeed terrifying, but the believers had done their homework. Thanks to all the digging they’d done—while pretending to worship that fake goddess, Melfina—they were now thoroughly familiar with what they were dealing with. The plan they had developed involved scattering the hostage children and keeping them in more than a dozen locations, all beyond the range of the Oracle’s Summoning ability. Naturally, guards had been assigned

to each location as well. There was a limit to the number of Followers the Oracle could have, meaning it was impossible for her to save all the children in one go. The believers could maintain the leverage they had with the hostages and there was nothing the Oracle could do about it.

“The Oracle deeply hates Melfina’s name being marred. If she had refused our demands, it would have meant proclaiming to the world that she, Melfina’s Oracle, was someone who would abandon lost lambs of the flock. So, it makes sense that she wouldn’t hesitate to put her own life on the line to save her congregation.”

This man had every confidence—faith, even—in Colette’s dedication to Melfina. This was why the Elearis believers thought this absurd and ill-advised plan would work.

Suddenly, the transceiver in his ear buzzed to life. “Reporting. The Oracle and Heroes are on their way. To forestall any possible trouble, please send reinforcements to bolster the escort.”

“Reinforcements? Well, I suppose it would be a bad idea to split up the forces above,” the leader muttered to himself before replying, “All right, sending reinforcements now.” He then formed a team from the main force and sent them towards the spiral staircase.

“Ah, there they are.”

After a while, the clank of sabatons on stone could be heard from the staircase, growing louder by the moment. It wasn’t only one or two pairs, but a whole crowd, making the leader smile wryly, thinking about how excessively careful his comrades were being.

Sure enough, the Oracle and Heroes eventually came into view, surrounded by numerous figures clad in the white and silver vestments worn by those stationed above. However, due to how expansive this floor was, there was still quite a distance between the staircase and the believers’ camp. Everyone watched with growing impatience as the group seemed to approach with agonizing slowness.

“Good grief, I know we’re talking about the Heroes and the Oracle, but was there really a need to come in such numbers?” The leader chuckled to himself. “How many are even still manning the barricade above? Wait...the reinforcements I sent aren’t with—”

With extremely convenient timing, the leader’s transceiver buzzed again. “Reporting. Tensions were rising at the front line, so the reinforcements were ordered to remain up top.”

“Ah, I see. Well, that makes sense.”

Perhaps the sight of the Oracle, whom he had been so obsessed with, being right before his eyes had caused him to get sloppy. What would normally raise a red flag in his mind was now dismissed without a second thought.

After what felt like an eternity, the Oracle’s group reached the

camp.

“Welcome, Oracle and Heroes! Though I commend you for your courage in coming here, heedless of the danger, do you not think it was a rash decision? Or did you not expect this many to side with our cause?”

The leader spread his arms proudly, gesturing towards the large number of Elearis believers gathered behind him. He then shot the Oracle a look to see what her reaction was.

However, she seemed entirely uninterested. Even more, she suddenly hung her head and asked one of her escorts in a soft voice, “Um...is this enough?”

“Hmm...just a bit more,” the man replied.

The leader could not believe what he was seeing. With wide eyes, he asked, “Oracle, do you understand the situation you’re in? Every single word that comes out of your mouth now affects the fate of your poor, lost lambs.”

“I mean, you’re just going to say the same things Archbishop Richard did, right?” Colette replied with a plaintive sigh. “You’re using different words, but the message is the same. If you really want to convert more people, you need to talk about something else once in a while. You just don’t get it, Kaiser. That’s why you’d never be more than a bishop.”

The leader, Kaiser, froze in astonishment. He had never conversed with Colette directly, and the two had only been in close proximity as participants in large-scale ceremonial rites with Kaiser unilaterally looking at Colette. He had never even imagined that Colette would know his name.

What’s more, the Oracle of Deramis was famous for holding both herself and those around her to high standards. The way she was speaking now seemed very much out of character. Needless to say, Kaiser had not expected to be insulted to his face under the circumstances.

“You...know who I am?”

“I never forget the names and faces of the people I meet. That goes doubly for those vested in the cloth. Do you want me to recite the names of all the military officers, officials, and clergy of Deramis?”

“What on earth...”

“Colette, that’s enough. Everyone’s safe now.”

The man from the military escort whom Colette had conversed with earlier ignored Kaiser and addressed the Oracle by name and without honorifics. This threw Kaiser into even greater confusion. Someone in his ranks had entered into a personal relationship with the Oracle? Without anyone knowing? And who was “everyone”? Why were they safe? The thoughts whirled through his mind like a

hurricane...but thankfully, not for long.

“Everyone, come out and play!”

The sight of Colette stretching out her arms and shouting in a childish tone seemed like a reproduction of Kaiser’s earlier greeting. She, however, had a bright and innocent smile and radiated an adorable aura that endeared her to all. The biggest difference was her height. In the blink of an eye, she was now sitting on the shoulder of a giant teddy bear, surrounded by an army of jet-black knights brandishing Gatling guns. The thought *Is this the Oracle’s Summoning ability?!* flitted through Kaiser’s mind, but he had never heard of such a feat. Someone particularly skilled at sensing magic might have noticed what looked like strings attached to each of the knights’ limbs, but unfortunately, the Elearis believers were far too flustered.

Colette turned to the man at her side. “Asking just in case, dearest brother, but I believe we should keep Kaiser alive. What do you think?”

“I’ll leave it to your discretion,” the man replied, taking off his vestments to reveal an outfit that was black from head to toe. “Do what you want.”

“‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin?!” Kaiser recognized the man. No, to be more exact, there was no way he couldn’t have recognized him. After all, Kelvin was currently the center of attention in every single country on the Eastern Continent. Unfortunately, none of the believers had what it took to fight on equal footing with a Rank S adventurer.

“Okay, I’ll do whatever, then!” When Colette moved her ten fingers with incredible dexterity, the knights all pointed their muzzles at the Elearis believers.

“Hold... Hold on! Did you forget we have hostages?! If I give the word, those poor lost lambs—”

“That’s why I said ‘everyone’s safe now,’” the man in black interrupted. “Go on, try reaching out to your buddies on your transceiver.”

“That can’t be...”

Kaiser raised a hand to his ear, sending a message to each of the groups guarding the children. However, not a single one replied. All that came back was static loud enough to sound like a sandstorm.

“Thanks for keeping the hostages on the upper floors. They were all close enough that we only needed to send one person.”

“One... ONE person?! That can’t... You’re a liar! A deceiver! What you say is impossible! Do you know how massive this dungeon is?! We took every care, and the distance between each group is—”

“We have someone with us who’s good at rescuing hostages. And you say ‘massive,’ but the top two floors are the smallest, right? What, did you think we were going to walk it one foot in front of another?”

Nah, our companion got it done nice and quick, easy as going for a stroll.”

“A... A STROLL?!” Kaiser shook violently with rage, confusion, and most of all, terror. “Let me guess—you’re not actually the Oracle either?!”

“Oh, you finally figured it out?” Colette’s figure became blurry as her silver hair turned to gold and her height decreased. Once the effect had passed, she had reverted to her appearance as young Shutola.

“What...” Kaiser had no words. Just as he was thinking, *We’ve been had!* his transceiver buzzed.

“This is Number Eight. This is Number Eight. Please respond. Please respond.”

Kaiser recognized this voice. It was one of his fellow believers. He couldn’t raise his hand to his ear fast enough. “It’s me! I’m Kaiser! KILL THE HOSTAGES NOW!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. This was his last chance to make things right.

Oh, Goddess Elearis! Thank you for this one last chance to make a difference, to get in one final blow in retaliation! We bring your judgment down on those who foolishly chose to condemn and scorn us!

For a brief moment, glee washed over him.

“Oh, you actually said it...”

But glee turned to confusion yet again as the voice over the transceiver changed into someone else’s. It was more beautiful, but it sounded both disgusted and pitying.

“Mister, did you just try to kill my friends?” The girl on the teddy bear who was not Colette spoke in a detached voice that sent shivers down the spines of all the Elearis believers present. The smile was gone from her face, replaced by undisguised hostility.

“Sorry, we were testing you,” the man in black explained. “If you didn’t actually plan on harming the hostages, we could have worked this out. But you’ve gone and crossed that line.”

“Noooo! Please, esteemed Apos—”

“Dearest brother, I take back what I said earlier.”

From her position in the back, Nana turned away as the sound of gunfire filled the air. When silence returned, not a single follower of Elearis remained alive.

“This...was a bit too stomach-turning as an appetizer,” the man said with a grimace. “Well, now that the worthless bait is taken care of, let’s do some warm-up exercises and catch up with the others who went ahead.”

The threat hanging over Deramis had yet to be dispelled.



“Guys, I’m giving you a challenge. Catch up with us on the tenth floor.”

That was all Kelvin said before he took off into the dungeon at what was probably his top speed. To my surprise, even Efil left us behind. So, that left Sera and Shutola still here with us on Floor One.

“It’s a challenge from Teacher! Everyone, let’s do our best!”

“Okay... Yeah!”

Touya was raring to go, and Nana was again being pulled along in his wake. They were pumping their fists in the air in a show of motivation, so I knew there was no talking to them. It was good that Touya had learned how to retreat when needed, but I was pretty sure I would continue to have my work cut out for me for a long time still.

“Um, Sera-san?”

“Sorry, I’m busy dealing with all these corpses right now, so don’t talk to me, please. If you need something, go ask Shutola.”

When I had turned to Sera for help, I found her occupied with casting Hades’s Sanguine Army on the dead believers and turning them into crimson skeletons. As it turned out, *that* was why she had remained. She hadn’t stayed behind for *our* sake.

“I see. So that’s how you do it!”

Miyabi was entirely engrossed with watching Sera at work. There seemed to be some mutual understanding between the two Black Magic users. I had expected as much from Miyabi, but it didn’t seem like she’d be able to understand what was bothering me. That left only one person.

Shutola, the little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes who had been transformed into Colette a while ago, asked, “Are you okay, dearest sister Setsuna? You look kind of pale.”

She was such a sweet and kind girl that she came over to check on me even while controlling her huge plushie and more than twenty knight golems. This girl was so cute, she looked like a doll herself. I really wanted to hug and cuddle her—she was such an angel that I had a feeling that all my stress would fade away if I did.

However, I held myself back. “Mm-hm, I’m totally fine. Thank you for asking, though.”

“Are you sure? Okay, then. We’re setting off soon to catch up with dearest brother Kelvin, so get ready!”

Oh right, Shutola-chan’s abilities are also off the charts in her own way.

The fact that she only had to move her fingers and the marionettes under her control would annihilate her enemies came back to me—the mangled bodies strewn all around were undeniable proof. Her puppets moved with even greater synchronization than a well-trained army. Each could deal enormous destruction on its own,

but they also worked great as a team. I was still in absolute awe of how wide and comprehensive her field of view must have been.

When she noticed me looking at her plushie, a delighted gleam came to Shutola's eyes. "Oh, do you want to know about Georgios? Georgios is..." She began telling me all sorts of things about the plushie. First, Georgios was its name, and it was the main source of her battle strength. After being asked to, Efil had made it in one night and given it to her.

So, on top of archery and cooking, Efil-san is great at sewing too?! She really can do everything. We're so far apart, I can't even compare myself to her...

Next, Shutola explained that the golems standing protectively around her had been made by Kelvin. She simply called them Guards. However, before getting into the extra features that the Guards were outfitted with, I had no idea how powerful a normal golem created by magic was. So I drew on the only golems I'd ever seen for reference: the ones guarding Kelvin's house.

The Guards were more than 180 centimeters tall, making them a notch smaller than Gerard, who was similarly clad in full-body armor all the time. Their shields were par for the course for Kelvin's party, which meant they were ridiculously tough. The biggest things about them, however, were their lances, which were outfitted with Gatling guns. Unlike the guns I knew, there was no reloading needed; instead, these gun-lances shot bullets created from MP. Touya had gotten super excited, going "Look at this" and "Look at that," but I was still coming to terms with the whole "knights with lances that are actually guns" thing.

Kelvin-san made these too? I guess there's really no limit to what's possible for him.

"Heeeey, Setsuna! What're you standing there looking so down for? If we don't hurry up, Teacher's gonna leave us behind," Touya shouted urgently.

I took a second to gather myself, then replied, "Okay, I'm coming!" before running over, my hand resting on the handle of my katana.

That's right, I can't just remain in my thoughts. Only the top two floors are safe, and Deramis's most powerful monsters are waiting for us starting on Floor Three. According to the rumors, there might even be a Rank S monster at the bottom. I've made up my mind to go, so I need to get my head in the game. I swear I'll protect my friends!



The vegetation covering Floors One and Two became cold, inorganic stone pavement on Floor Three, dotted by what could only

be described as large art installations of humanoid figures with hands reaching towards the sky. Considering where we were, I figured they had to be tombstones, but their designs were so bizarre that I was lost for words.

This floor was even larger than the ones before, so much so that I couldn't get a firm grasp of the exact size of it. The dungeon was shaped like a rhombus, or rather two quadrangular pyramids that met at their bases. Based on this, Floors Five and Six should have been the biggest, and the floors should have gotten successively smaller after we passed Floor Six.

"Mm...dearest brother is now on Floor F—no, Floor Six, I think. Grandpa Gerard and dearest sister Mel went ahead, so they're now on Floor Eight," Shutola informed us, indicating that she had a way of sensing how far away her party members were.

"Already?!"

"So fast."

Aren't they going too fast? What mad pace were they setting while we were still going through the first two floors that didn't even have enemies?!

"Grandpa and Mel-san are so far ahead because they got a head start from dearest brother Summoning them on lower floors. Our starting positions are different, so there's no point comparing ourselves to them. And we don't have time for that now. Look." Shutola narrowed her eyes, jerking her chin forward.

Just then, my Danger Detection went off.

"So many?" Nana groaned softly.

Figures broke through the patches between the stone pavement. When I took a better look, I realized they looked like smaller, shadowy copies of the "art installations" we'd seen. The monsters continued pouring out of the shadows, almost filling the area around us.

"No problem. Each one is weak," Miyabi remarked.

"Miyabi's right," Touya replied. "If we stay calm and fight normally, we're more than strong enough to beat them all."

It was at times like this when I felt Touya and Miyabi were truly reliable. The two of them already had their weapons out and at the ready.

"This is much easier to deal with than the Cavern of the Divine Beasts," Shutola said from her perch overhead. "In front are Rank B monsters called labyrinth shadows. If you don't attack hard enough, they'll split into more and more copies, so be careful. Aim for the head."

Ah, Shutola-chan has Analyze Eye. Her instructions are clear and to the point, and they're honestly a great help. Okay, we've got this. There might be a lot of enemies, but they're only Rank B!

“Also, I guess you can say we’re lucky. If we follow that path, things should be easier for us. Plus, it lets us know which way to go.”

“Huh?” I strained my eyes once again. “There is a line that the monsters...seem to be avoiding?”

There was a line of stone pavement visible, which the shadowy monsters were not crowding onto. It stretched into the distance like a path, somehow giving me the impression that it was sparkling.

Shutola nodded. “Mm-hm, that’s the path Rion-chan took. She probably ran through as usual, killing everything in her way, but the ground’s been purified, so the monsters can’t get close. Rion-chan is basically holiness in human form, after all.”

I saw that she was entirely serious, but I had no idea what she was talking about. I only barely managed to mumble, “I...see...”



The eighth floor of the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits looked much more like a temple actively used in worship of a god rather than a dungeon. It had walls inlaid with platinum, a solemn and austere architectural style, and braziers casting dancing shadows that added an indescribable sublimity to the entire scene. Even on this floor, however, a fierce battle was being waged. Those embroiled in it were none other than the two who had been sent out ahead of the rest of the party: Melfina and Gerard.

“Grrroooooaaann...”

The monsters on this floor all looked like knights. They were from different races, wore different equipment, and bore indications of differing social classes—there wasn’t a single commonality to any of their designs. The one thing that was the same, though, was their ferocity, which was akin to a fully buffed, well-trained knight order charging in with the resolve to die in battle. What’s more, just like on Floor Three, there was no apparent end to them.

“Frost Bind!”

“Hmph!”

In spite of the extremely hostile environment, Sword Guru and The Smile were having no trouble whatsoever. Melfina would stop a wave of charging monsters by freezing their feet and then Gerard would bisect them all at the waist with one sweep of his sword. This was fast becoming mere routine for the two as they made steady progress across the floor.

“Ba ha ha ha! Princess! Am I not shining right now?!”

“Aren’t you always shining, Gerard? From being surrounded by your grandchildren?”

Currently, the knight laughing at the top of his voice was being buffed by the Unique Skill Glory Within Mine Hands, which increased

his stats whenever he dealt damage to and killed a target. What's more, for each target killed, the duration of the skill's effect would extend a little more, and the monsters coming his way seemed truly endless. His rampage was going to continue for quite a while longer.

However, although their progress was entirely smooth and they had yet to encounter any problems, Melfina's face was clouded. "This is strange..."

"What is?" Gerard replied. "We are making good time, are we not?"

"I recall the monsters in this dungeon all being undead. However, I feel a strong vitality from the ones we are fighting. They're not conscious, but they don't look dead."

"Now that you mention it..."

Dainsleif smashed through a monster's torso, armor and all. The blood that sprayed out looked nothing like the muddy, impure blood of zombies and ghouls. Even someone completely unfamiliar with fighting could tell how much fresher this was.

"They actually do seem pretty similar to normal people."

"Well, I suppose there's no point thinking about it. I'm sure the answer lies deeper within."

While wiping out all the enemies in their way, the two continued going up and down the labyrinthian passages, which were extensive enough to match that of a smaller dungeon. Knights got into formation and lined up to block the way with their greatshields, but Gerard and Melfina made short work of them just as they had all the previous monsters.

Suddenly, the two of them stopped. Melfina said, "Well, let's prioritize rescuing the remaining hostages. If I remember correctly, of those from the orphanage, Sister Atra and Sister Ria are still unaccounted for, right?"

"Indeed. My king's sent over their names and images. Even I will be able to recognize them when I see them. Thanks to Sera and Ange, we now also have a general idea where they are. And this...is one of those locations."

The black helmet looked up. Gerard was indicating a large, spacious room at the end of a passage branching off. If he was heading for the staircase that led to the floor below, this path was the wrong way, as it was a dead end. Sera and Ange had already finished mapping this entire dungeon—except for the tenth floor—and uploaded the information to the Network. The reason Gerard and Melfina had chosen to go down this route was to save the two nuns who were not among the hostages already recovered from the Elearris believers.

"The one being held on Floor Eight is..." Gerard walked into the

room and saw the woman tied to the enormous cross at the far end. "Sister Ria, I believe."

The nun was unconscious but, thankfully, otherwise unhurt. The same, however, could not be said of her glasses. They lay on the floor, probably having fallen off when she was hoisted up, with one of the lenses cracked and broken. On either side of the cross were white coffins decorated with the national emblem of Deramis.

"Hmm, on par with Sera's. Impressive."

"What is?"

"Oh, nothing. Only my king would understand."

Melfina chose not to question what Gerard had said in such a serious-sounding tone. There was no time to do so anyway, as another person was standing in front of the cross that Sister Ria was tied to.

"Well, well, well. Look who's come. I confess, I'd expected you to look a lot more exhausted from the trip, Goddess Melfina."

Marcel Gottes, the cardinal who was supposed to be all the way up above the entrance to the dungeon, stepped out from a shadowed corner beyond the light of the lit braziers. He was wearing the same outfit from when he had welcomed Kelvin's party to Deramis, complete with the red stole and amiable smile. However, the fact that he knew Mel's real identity as Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation, was a huge warning sign.

"I must be getting on in years," Gerard mumbled. "I think I see Cardinal Marcel before my eyes."

"Don't worry, Gerard; I see him too. Cardinal Marcel, you were an Elearis believer all along? Is the man above ground an impostor?"

"That's very close, but not quite. I'd say you got half of it," Marcel replied after rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "First, the me up above is not an impostor. Anything short of the real thing would have been exposed by Kelvin-sama's Rank S Analyze Eye. Unfortunately, I haven't quite reached the point where I can overcome that hurdle."

Back when Marcel was arguing with the Elearis believers in the Great Cathedral, Kelvin had been watching the scene alongside Efil after borrowing Farsight from her. Just as Marcel was saying, a body double would have been exposed immediately.

"Secondly, if asked whether I'm an Elearis believer...honestly, I'm not. However, I did help them out. Specifically, I thinned out the guards assigned to the area around the orphanage and the entrance to the catacombs so that the believers could move about with greater ease."

"You're practically saying that you're a believer."

"My exact position in this whole incident is a bit too complicated to explain, I'm afraid. However, I do think that kidnapping orphans and ultimately trying to kill them is absolutely unforgivable. The

believers were a group that was overly obsessed with Elearis-sama and blindly believed that, should the need arise, involving innocents and killing them was justified. Such fools are not worthy of calling themselves believers, and their actions only served to generate unnecessary blowback from society.”

“What is *your* goal, then? Why are you giving us so much information unsolicited?”

“Oh, please don’t mind me. The fact remains that I aided the Elearis believers, and that, too, is unforgivable.” Marcel reached into a chest pocket slowly, prompting Gerard to readjust his grip on Dainsleif and Melfina to adopt a sharp look. “However, one question, if I may. With the two nuns still being held as hostages, why did you walk straight in here? If I had been another run-of-the-mill Elearis believer, I just might have finished off this woman first.”

Melfina studied him. “The transceiver the believers used only had a range of two or three floors. Even if someone on Floor Two above sent a message, there’s no way it’d reach you down here on Floor Eight.”

This information about the transceivers had come from Kelvin, who had examined one using Analyze Eye.

“In short,” Melfina continued, “I believed chances were high that you belong to a third force. The believers only kidnapped the children; you purposely went to kidnap the nuns. Not to serve as hostages, but as bait to draw *us* out.”

“Interesting. Do you have any proof?”

“Perhaps not. However, the longer this situation lasts, the more critical it becomes. And eventually, the pope will have no choice but to abandon the remaining hostages. That being the case, it makes sense to save as many as possible.”

“Ohhhh, I am relieved to hear that our goddess is such a compassionate and benevolent being. And here I am, tainted by this imperfect world and corrupted by my participation in its hideous power struggles, yet blessed by this opportunity to hear your voice in person. Oh, Oracle, I now understand why you adore her so!”

Melfina had put a nice spin on everything, but many parts of the strategy had been rather off the cuff. Floors One and Two were fine and all, but even the goddess had broken out in a cold sweat when she had learned that some of the hostages were on the deepest floors. She was feeling relieved that the decision to charge in at top speed hadn’t led to the worst outcome. Still, it was also true that in the absence of a clearer plan, using Summoning to effectively create a shortcut to the lower floors was the most sensible thing to do.

“Melfina-sama, I have every faith that you will be able to overcome this situation as well.” Marcel revealed what he had been

reaching for: a large stake. As Melfina and Gerard stared in shock, he drove it through his own heart. Grunting in pain, he cried, "O ancient heroes, awaken from your slumber to slay this goddess!"

The lids of the two coffins in the room suddenly slid open with a heavy scraping sound and crashed to the floor as two figures sat up. The one on Melfina's side had distinctive ears and wore a traditional outfit that identified him as an elf. He looked very advanced in years—a rare sight among elves—indicating that he had lived a long life in his time. However, his features were extremely chiseled and attractive—even the white mustache around his mouth gave him a stylish appearance.

The person in the left coffin wore a knight's armor with blue accents and wielded a shield bearing a crest. The design of his armor was different from that of the Holy Order of Knights. He had a face that radiated masculinity and a powerful force of will. With muscles bulging underneath his armor, he seemed to embody the general public's ideal of a knight.

"Hm? Where are we?"

"Is...that you, Sorondil?"

"What a nostalgic face! Ragat, you old dog! I never thought I'd see you again. What a strange turn of fate this is!"

"Where...are we?"

As soon as they got up, the two men from the coffins broke into conversation, revealing that they knew each other well. But then they looked around the room curiously, clueless about the situation they were in.

Gerard, who was equally baffled, asked Melfina through telepathy, ::Princess, do you know who these people are?::

::They were companions of the previous Hero, Serge Flore. The elf is "Silver Bow" Sorondil and the knight is "Taciturn" Ragat Titan. After their party defeated Demon Lord Gustav, Serge returned to her world and these two eventually passed away::

::As in, they should be dead, right? I'm sorry if this sounds wild, but I think I'm staring right at them, and they look alive and well::

::Sounds just like what we were talking about earlier. However, these two are not dead. Strangely, they are very much alive. Something's happened on this floor::

There was no way to resurrect the dead; not even Rank S White Magic had such a spell. That was common knowledge in this world. As an extreme exception, there was Reincarnate, a power exclusive to the Goddess of Reincarnation, but this clearly wasn't it. Even Iris, who possessed Reincarnate in an imperfect state, could not use it in this way.

::I see. Just now, Marcel did mention "ancient heroes." I guess he

wasn't entirely wrong.::

::Just in case, I'll let Honey know.::

Melfina summed up what had happened and what they now knew and telepathically sent it to Kelvin, who she figured was still powering through the middle floors.

I'm coming now! Right now! Leave some for me! was his reply. The battle junkie considered even great heroes from the past possible opponents to fight. There was little doubt that he was now heading to Floor Eight at an incredible speed.

::Okay...yes...understood. We'll do that.::

::What did my king say, Princess?::

When Melfina finished communicating with Kelvin, Gerard asked her for an update, despite having guessed the general gist of it.

::He said that my voice is really pretty and lovely today...and that he wants to see me soon.::

However, the reply Gerard got, as well as the sight of his companion squirming in embarrassment and blushing furiously, left him dumbfounded. *My king chose love over battle?!* he thought for a brief moment before shaking his shield hand in an exaggerated gesture of denial.

::No, no, I won't fall for such an obvious lie!::

::Come on, you don't have to deny it that strongly! It wouldn't hurt you to *pretend* to fall for it, right? Ah! It depends strongly on the time and location, but he sometimes cares for me as much as he does battle—::

::Stop, stop! I can't stomach any more details!::



As usual, their conversation took place in a matter of seconds. Someone looking on would have seen Mel run through a bunch of expressions, from embarrassed to depressed to fierce blushing, in quick succession. Everything went by so fast that an ordinary person wouldn't have been able to catch any of it, but in this case, the ancient heroes were no ordinary people.

"My oh my, what an alluring young lady we have here. Would you be interested in enjoying a cup of tea with me?"

"Silver Bow" Sorondil had caught every one of the expressions that Melfina cycled through but decided to hit on her anyway. One might question if trying to pick up girls in a dungeon was advisable, but as he did not know that he was currently in a dungeon, perhaps it could be said this was unavoidable. With a whole bunch of caveats, of course.

"No, thank you."

"Urk!"

Upon being rejected by Melfina, who maintained a straight face and didn't even stop to think about it, Sorondil clutched his chest and staggered backward.

"You're...still doing that at your age?"

"If I meet a cute girl or a beautiful woman, I hit on her. That's manners for a gentleman."

"What...about Serge?"

"I chase love wherever it's closest! But if Serge is here too, I'll definitely go for her!"

"Hmph."

"What's that 'hmph' supposed to mean?! Are you judging me?! I know you and Sai are closet perverts! In the first place, as men—"

Just as Sorondil, who was surprisingly energetic for a newly resurrected dead man, was about to launch into a whole speech, Melfina interrupted him.

"Can I cut the banter short right there? Do the two of you understand the situation you're in?"

"Oh! A bit of a sharp tone, I see. As someone who's just woken up, I would appreciate a kiss to jog my memory a little. Wouldn't you, Ragat?"

The man in blue armor looked at Melfina, then averted his gaze, saying nothing.

"Ahhh, you still have trouble speaking with women you're meeting for the first time. My lady, what say you to chatting with me instead?"

"Gerard, we're in trouble. These people don't understand language."

“We must work with what we’ve got, Princess.”

“Princess?! Is the fair lady a princess?! Do tell!”

“You, be quiet.”

Melfina could not believe that the conversation was making no headway whatsoever. She felt a rising desire to wrap this up quickly and get back outside.

“I suppose I have no choice.” She sighed. “You two, what do you see behind you?”

“Behind us?”

Sorondil and Ragat turned around, finally noticing Cardinal Marcel. Red blood was bubbling from where the stake had pierced his chest, with the puddle underneath him more than large enough to indicate a fatal wound. Instead of being dead, however, his body was undergoing drastic changes. Previously wrinkled and brittle with age, it was now expanding into a white, muscular form with sharp, swordlike scales covering his arms and the jagged teeth of carnivorous beasts sprouting from his mouth. Finally, the light in his eyes died, marking his transformation from human to monster complete. However, despite its fiendish appearance, the creature showed no intention of moving from its spot, staying in place as if it meant to merely watch how things developed.

“By ‘what do I see,’ are you referring to this dainty young girl? With her pretty black hair, she looks like a younger version of Serge.”

“Hm? I...see a more mature Serge radiating motherliness.”

When they turned back, delirium could be seen in the eyes of the two men.

::Gerard::

::I know::

After the brief exchange, no more conversation was needed. The ancient heroes were seeing an illusion; in all likelihood, they were seeing the form that they liked most. The now monster Marcel was doing this for two reasons. One, so they would not attack him.

“Whoa, whoa, you plan on attacking such a young girl?! You two must be mad!”

“Absolutely unforgivable.”

And two, the heroes would become hostile towards Melfina and Gerard.

“Now that I’m looking closely, that man in black armor looks like a Demon Lord! You were deceiving us this whole time?!”

“And the girl...is strange and suspicious.”

“Watch out, Ragat. I remember where I’ve seen her strange mannerisms before! That’s how people act when they’re communicating through the type of telepathy that comes with the Summoning skill! I’ve seen the Oracle of Deramis acting that way

before!”

“I...don’t recall.”

“That’s because you didn’t even *look* at her! I know because *I* was looking at her twenty-four seven!”

Both Melfina and Gerard were at a loss for words. It was as if the situation had been about to turn serious but hadn’t quite made it all the way.



Sorondil moved first. He took out a bow with a dull silver sheen and loosed an arrow faster than the eye could follow. The arrow that shot out was also silver, as it was a material that was easy to imbue with magic. This was how he bolstered his arrows’ speed and power.

“No mercy at all, I see.”

His target was Melfina. Although he had taken her by surprise, she managed to evade the silver arrow with the barest of movements. Not only that, she even caught it as it passed with only the first three fingers of her hand. The distinct elven markings along the shaft that made it plain the arrow was Sorondil’s seemed to burn into the heroes’ eyes as they stared incredulously.

“She caught it?!” Sorondil cried with disbelief.

“Incoming,” Ragat murmured before stepping out in front of him. His role was to protect the party as its tank. This duty, which he had developed while traveling as a part of Serge’s group, now naturally moved his body. The black knight, Gerard, was closing in—he had taken Sorondil’s arrow as the gong for the start of the fight and now swung his greatsword in attack.

“Guh!”

Ragat deployed a barrier centered around his blue greatshield, which was large enough to cover several people. Together, shield and barrier were almost as firm as a rock wall, but Ragat still found himself nearly floating up for a split second from the force of the impact. He held on to his pride as a knight, however, and braced himself by throwing every ounce of weight he had behind his shield. Thanks to that, he just managed to weather the terrible blow.

::Well, I’ll be! Princess, did you see? He blocked my sword!::

It had been a long time since Gerard had fought someone who could block his attacks instead of dodging them. And not only did Ragat block, he was still charging despite knowing the danger. Gerard couldn’t help but share his delight with his companion.

::I can see how you’d be happy about it, but I believe you unconsciously went too easy on him, Gerard::

::Hm? Did I?::

Gerard had gone with a simple easy-to-read uppercut swing in

order to gauge his opponent's abilities. He had not meant to, and it was only when Melfina pointed it out that he realized he had indeed used only half his strength. The reason he'd held back was because, during the very few opportunities he had to fight, he was able to resolve the situation without getting serious. The times he got to go all out were pretty much limited to practice matches with his companions and when he'd fought the Apostle and Divine Pillar in Gaun.

::If so, then I shall now get serious.::

He pushed Dainsleif against Ragat's barrier with all his strength and activated its power. The blade began tearing through the barrier by absorbing all of its MP.

Did my shield just... Ragat's shield barrier had been broken before, with one instance being the final battle against Demon Lord Gustav. That time, however, the barrier had failed only after taking several incredibly heavy hits. Never before had he seen the barrier destroyed by a single hit, and for the destruction to happen not upon the moment of impact, but a beat after he had fully blocked an attack.

Now that there was nothing in his way, Gerard could land hits directly on Ragat and his shield. Before the vestiges of the barrier had even dissipated, Dainsleif landed with even more destructive power than any monster was capable of.

"Oh, oops."

"Arrrrghhh!"

This time, Gerard ended up using too much strength, sending Ragat—armor, shield, and man—flying towards the far wall like a cannonball. The blue shield that represented his role as protector of his party and the people was completely bent, folded over like a mere piece of cardboard. Naturally, Ragat had not gotten off unscathed after taking such a devastating blow head-on. He could not muster any strength in his muscular body, and his bones creaked in protest. In fact, he was on the verge of blacking out.

::You sure are ruthless sometimes, Gerard. Look, he's totally going to crash into the wall.::

::But, I mean....::

There was, however, someone who offered Ragat a saving hand in his moment of need—literally. The monster that had been Marcel reached out with one of its white arms and caught the large knight with surprising gentleness, bringing him in.

This warm embrace and faint fragrance... It's the warmth of my mother. How long have I forgotten this memory? Ahh, Serge. I knew it. You really are the one who is suitable to be my mother...

No one knew this, but just before he lost consciousness, Ragat was extremely talkative in his mind. Although it was merely an illusion, this knight who had fought for a full lifetime surely deserved a

moment of peace and joy...discounting the fact that the source of that peace was none other than whatever had become of Marcel. All Marcel was doing was leading a lost lamb to inner peace. This was an exchange that worked out for both parties, so it would be boorish to pick it apart by focusing too much on the details.

“What?! Ragat, you! What do you think you’re doing to my Serge?! I knew you were a closet pervert this whole time, but to think you were a lolicon as well! Get away from her!”

As it turned out, there was another lost lamb here in the form of an elf. Perhaps there were more people who ended up on the wrong path in a dungeon.

“You’re next.”

Ignoring the fuss that Sorondil was kicking up, Gerard rushed at his next target, Marcel. He lifted his greatsword high with the intention of bringing it down in one great slash.

“I won’t let you!” Sorondil screeched, drawing his bow.

“And I won’t let *you*,” Mel interjected with anger in her voice, stabbing his right shoulder with her lance and throwing him off balance. “What is this? You’re looking away immediately after trying to pick me up? It displeases me greatly to say this, but I’m who you should be paying attention to.” She slammed Sorondil into the ground with far greater force than her thin, shapely arms suggested was possible. The spear ran through his body and buried itself into the ground.

“ARRGHH! Ugh, you...have my apologies, fair lady. However, I’m now...in the middle of... Huh?”

Sorondil’s bow hand felt cold. In fact, it was freezing. When Sorondil registered the strange sensation, he looked down at his hand and found the entire thing encased in a solid block of ice, still gripping his beloved bow. Even now, that ice was climbing up his arm, giving off pings and crackles that sounded both beautiful and cruel at once.

“Wha... What is this?!”

“And that’s why I told you not to look away. How many times must I... You know what? Forget it.”

“AAARRRGHHHHH!”

Ice was also sprouting from the place where Melfina’s spear pierced his shoulder. The terror he felt from seeing the encroachment come from two directions was far greater than their sum. Thankfully, it did not take very long for Sorondil to turn into an ice sculpture, though whether that was a good thing or not was up for debate. Although she had been as merciless fighting him as she had been when helping Kelvin learn how to control his Rank S spell, naturally, none of the care she usually showed Kelvin afterwards was seen here.

::Now then, how’re things on your side, Gerard?::

::Mm, I'm just about done.::

Gerard propped his greatsword onto his shoulder at the same moment the top half of Marcel's form slid to the ground. He had finished his fight as well.

::How strange. The beast was powerful, but its movements were so sluggish, it might as well have been a sitting duck. Could Marcel not control his new form?::

::But he did catch Ragat in time. In all likelihood...:: Melfina cut herself off and approached the former cardinal's corpse. "Marcel, I don't understand why you threw in your lot with the Elearis believers, and I don't plan on digging into it. However, your actions before your death were admirable, proving to me that you were indeed a true clergyman. That is something you can be proud of. And now, you may rest in peace."

Melfina chanted a short line, and a light enveloped Marcel's transformed body. When it faded, all that remained was a heart pierced with a stake, but this, too, soon crumbled to dust.

::What do you think he wanted to achieve, anyway?::

::I believe there is a high chance that whoever gave him that stake lied about what it did, though there's no way to prove it anymore. For now, let's get Sister Ria down.::

Melfina flew up and severed the chains that held the nun to the giant cross. Gerard watched her until his eyes suddenly fell on the figure of the elf who was still frozen to the ground.

::By the way, Princess, do you think my king will be disappointed when he hears we defeated these "ancient heroes" before he got here? Actually, I'm pretty sure he will be.::

::It's still hundreds of times better than letting him be disappointed by how weak they are. To put things into perspective, these two did not actually Evolve after defeating Gustav. That means they're weaker than Philip and Sai.::

::Hm? Didn't the elf who fought alongside Serge turn into a high elf? That's what the Elder of the Village of Elves said.::

::Sorondil died from old age. That alone is proof that he did not Evolve. We've both seen enough of his personality now—he probably claimed he did in a bid to impress a woman and word got back to the village. I mean, I can see it happening.::

::I...can....:: Gerard made a decision to not tell Efil about this matter.

During the course of this conversation, Sister Ria was finally freed.

"All right, she's down. All that's left is to heal her back up."

"Nn...nn?" Slowly, the nun's eyelids fluttered open.

Mel leaned over. "Hi there. Do you still hurt anywhere?"

"You're...Mel-san...and this is... Ah!" Ria suddenly gasped and sat

up in a hurry. Gerard made sure to catch every second of her jiggling chest using Mind's Eye in order to serve his duty as a knight by presenting it to his king afterwards.

"Please! Atra! Sister Atra! She's in trouble! They're going to sacrifice her! Please save her!"

Even Gerard had the decency to not leave a record of her teary face.



We ran. Monsters appeared before us, but we cut, pierced, burned, and smashed them all. It didn't matter *how* we did it; all we focused on was reaching the staircase that led to a lower floor as quickly as possible.

After receiving Melfina's message, my heart had been beating so loudly, I thought I could actually hear it with my ears. The reason was obvious: heroes from a past era were waiting for me! That was all that mattered. However, I was the one with the lowest Agility among my companions. No matter how hard I pushed myself, everyone else still had to go slower to match my pace. *Thank you, everyone.*

The group currently consisted of Efil, Rion, and Ange. That just happened to be everyone in my party whom I could communicate with telepathically thanks to Clotho but not use Summoning on, but we were pretty well-balanced in terms of roles in battle.

Rion, the Hero, was suitable for the vanguard; Ange's skill set made her an incredible hit-and-run DPS; Efil was the hunter with off-the-charts firepower and unerring accuracy; and I provided support from the back with my ridiculous MP pool. At least, that was how I'd describe us from the context of a role-playing game. Needless to say, we were not just proceeding in a single file but were maintaining a proper formation.

Put simply, Efil and I ran shoulder to shoulder in the back, blasting the monsters in our path with arrows and spells. From her position in front, Rion slashed through everything in the way, her very presence also working to forcibly make swathes of undead pass on—all of them looked happy and peaceful while fading away.

That left Ange, who zipped about cleaning up the remaining monsters. How this looked in effect was basically a reproduction of Moses and the Red Sea, with us leaving a path in our wake that looked weirdly clean and opened up.

Rion's Unique Skill, Absolute Purification, proved perfect against the monsters that appeared in this dungeon. So far, we had yet to receive anything that could be called a proper attack. Of course, there were mage types who cast spells at us, but all magic attacks, hexes, curses, debuffs, and even monsters themselves became purified and

dissipated as soon as they came within three meters of Rion. We didn't even have to lift a finger. The Unique Skill that I'd originally thought was for dispelling debuffs had proved far, far more powerful than I'd imagined.

Now that we were on Floor Six, we were seeing pretty powerful monsters with a few Rank A enemies showing up every now and then. One example was the butchery wraith that had just appeared in front of us, swaying like an apparition. It wore a tattered white dress and was humanoid in form but ridiculously tall. A creepy noise akin to a broken tape recorder leaked out of the upside-down crescent gash that served as its mouth. The only way something like this would be above ground was as the super powerful boss monster of a haunted mansion. Everything about it screamed horror.

Of course, even this supposedly super powerful evil spirit turned tail, shrieked, and fled when it got close enough to Rion—with very beautiful form, I might add. This was just not its lucky day, however, as its top speed was still nowhere near as fast as she was. Several seconds of tag later, she had caught up and the monster was fully within range of Absolute Purification.

“No, no, no, nooooo!”

Oh? This one's pretty stubborn. Is its lingering regret that strong?

As it turned out, even evil spirits had a will. Its scream grated on our ears like nails on a chalkboard—clearly some form of a curse. However, its efforts were in vain. Although we could still hear the sound, the effects it carried were entirely stripped away by Rion's skill. Ange threw a kunai that landed squarely in the monster's forehead, and Rion, in passing, slashed it with an Aklama clad in holy energy. That served as the final nail in the coffin.

“Noooo...ooo... Thank y—”

Right before it disappeared fully, the spirit assumed the appearance of an ephemeral woman who actually looked quite pretty. Just like all other undead here, being purified seemed to have granted her freedom. I was glad to see she had a smile on her face during her last moments.

Ahhhh, no, I need to focus! Staircase! We need to get to the staircase! Wait for me, ancient heroes!

::So, Kel-nii, what did Mel-nee say, exactly?:: Rion asked while cutting down another monster as powerful as the butchery wraith. There was no mercy at all in her actions—as long as a target remained before us in the direction we were traveling in, she marked it for purification.

How should I put it? After her lessons with the Beast King, she's gotten a lot more...resolute and mature. Dear sister, your brother feels very conflicted about this change.

In any case, I shared what Mel had told me with everyone else.

::Resurrection of ancient heroes? You mean, dead people came back to life?::

That's what Melfina said. That's why we have to hurry! Otherwise, Mel's gonna eat them up!

::That wording's gonna cause misunderstandings, Kelvin,:: Ange cut in. ::But still, resurrection. Yeah, something comes to mind.::

It was indeed common sense in this world that the dead could not be brought back to life. But just like Ange, I was reminded of a certain...someone. In fact, Ange was the one who had told me about this person.

Grrr, this place is seriously big.

::The fifth and sixth floors are the most spacious, after all. Even though we are taking the shortest path, it's still going to take us a while longer.::

The entire floor was enveloped in darkness. Not to the point where we couldn't see our way; candles did grant us a certain amount of visibility. The general atmosphere was similar to that of a ruined building, one that was perfect as a paranormal spot. Considering how huge the place was and the kinds of monsters that appeared, I could easily imagine someone who was bad with horror having a very terrible time here.

I thought about how Miyabi would probably really love this place, but Nana worried me. My party? Oh, we were just fine. Every single time Efil attacked something, we basically got a giant bonfire going—let's just say it's hard to maintain a creepy atmosphere when the place is as bright as day the majority of the time.

::Huh? Kel-nii, I see a light ahead.::

According to the map, there's a giant room that way.

We stopped right before the room. Cutting a sharp contrast with the rest of the dungeon, this was a giant hall brightly lit from corner to corner. The material used in the walls and floor was as dazzling as the Great Cathedral up above, and there were statues high up near the ceiling depicting angels, pegasi, and various other symbols of holiness. The ceiling was even painted over with murals that strongly reminded me of historic castles in Europe. However, the most conspicuous element was, without a doubt, the ridiculously huge gravestone in the center.

I mean, you didn't have to match the size of the grave to the size of the floor, did you? Hmm, is this room meant as a temple dedicated to whoever's entombed here?

::Do you think it's a trap?:: Rion asked.

Seems like it, I replied. Do you sense anything, Ange?

::Hmm...at the very least, there are no physical or magical

mechanisms set up here. If anything happens, it'll come from that grave.::

Since I had Summoned Melfina and Gerard directly to Floor Seven, they had not passed through this place. In other words, this was my party's very first encounter with it. *I guess we might as well go for it.*

"Efil, fire away."

"Understood, Master."

BOOOOOOM!

My maid fired off an arrow right after I ordered it, not missing a beat. The gravestone was blown up. Fragments whizzed everywhere. A cloud of dust filled the air. A dragon appeared. Wait—a *what* appeared?!

"Who's raising a clamor, hm? Who is it?"

The long neck that appeared from the dust cloud and turned to glare at us was indeed that of a dragon. What's more, it was intelligent enough to talk. Its white scales reminded me of Rosalia in her dragon form, but this one took the white theme to the extreme without a single blemish on its skin. It was rather sizable, easily matching Dahak's length from snout to tail.

"I awake from a long slumber and this is what I find? Do you puny humans realize it is the Light Dragon King that you are disrespecting? Are you that eager for death?"

Wait, I think I just heard something that's really got my heart pumping. Did I imagine it?

"Hey, you. Big guy. Did you just call yourself a dragon king? Did I hear you right?" I asked the towering form before my eyes.

Gotta ask, just in case. After all, there are only eight of them in the world, right? What are the chances of meeting one in a place like this? And from a grave. This has gotta be some big joke.

"A mere human dares make me, an incarnation of nobility, *repeat* myself? How foolish. But thank your gods that my noble self is also magnanimous. I shall declare it again. I am the noble Light Dragon King, one who stands at the top of the dragon race and possesses power to rival the gods!"

Oh wow, he was actually courteous enough to answer my question. And what, is "noble" his favorite word? He used it a lot of times just now.

Of course, being a calm and wary man, I was not idiotic enough to take someone's claim at face value. And I had someone I could ask in this situation.

DAHAAAAAAK! Is that really the Light Dragon King?! Is he powerful?!

Normally, I'd turn to Melfina for this sort of thing, but she was occupied at the moment. As the saying went, every man knows his

own business best. So it made sense to ask a dragon about other dragons. Since they would be too conspicuous appearing on the streets of Deramis, all my dragon Followers were currently staying inside my MP pool. Consequently, I could casually reach out to any of them whenever I wanted.

::You...sound rather excited, brother.::

What are you saying?! I am the very definition of calm! But that's beside the point! Tell me! Quickly!

::Y-Yes, sir! To the best of my knowledge, the position of Light Dragon King changed hands during the Great War era.::

Go on.

::Long story short, he lost in a duel with a subordinate. The condition for an ancient dragon to Evolve into a dragon king is to make a current dragon king admit defeat. And when a dragon king admits defeat, they lose the title and the power. Basically, in the world of dragons, it's eat or be eaten!::

I see. So that's the reason Dahak, Boga, and Mdofarak never Evolved no matter how high they raised their levels. I guess if level were the sole condition for Evolving, dragon kings would be all over the place.

::I heard from my old man that in that duel, the previous Light Dragon King actually lost his life. But it happened way before I was born, so I've no idea how true that is.::

Someone who's supposedly dead coming back to life. This again, huh?

::By the way, brother, couldn't you tell just by using Analyze Eye?::

Now that I know about the existence of the Disguise skill...honestly, at the level we are, I feel like the info from Analyze Eye isn't worth much more than a general indicator going forward.

Based on what Dahak said, chances were that the white dragon I was facing was the one who had lost the throne of Light Dragon King. A different ancient dragon, the one who beat him, was alive somewhere else as the real dragon king. I had no idea what had happened for this dragon to be entombed here or how he had come back to life, but I did know that I felt somewhat disappointed.

At the same time, however, my expectations were rising. I did tell Dahak that I only took Analyze Eye readings as a general indicator and no longer fully relied on them, but what I saw from this dragon had undoubtedly moved me. After all, it stated his race as "White Dragon (Light Dragon King)."

No, no, I need to calm down. What is it that I ought to be fighting now? The ancient heroes? The Apostles? Or perhaps...this dragon king? Hold on, let me cool my head and sort things out.

My first option is to fight the ancient heroes that Melfina and Gerard found. If they're members of the previous Hero's party, that makes them

like perfected versions of Touya's group, with the achievement of having defeated the previous Demon Lord under their belt. I've been waiting for Touya's group to grow up this whole time so I can enjoy fighting a whole group of heroes, but I can have that fight here and now. This is very tempting. Very tempting indeed.

My second option is to fight the Apostle who's likely on the lowest floor at the moment, working on obtaining Holy Lance Eclipse. It's already clear that this Apostle is deeply involved in this whole incident. As such, chances of getting a battle just by going down to Floor Ten seem pretty high. If this individual is even more powerful than Ange, there's no way I'm letting that fight slip through my fingers. Nuh-uh, no siree.

My last option is to fight the "maybe" Light Dragon King that I'm looking at. If he's the real deal, then he's a target that tops nearly all others I could ever hope to meet. However, I only have his word for it. Taking into consideration what Dahak said, there's a strong likelihood that he's lost his powers as a dragon king and the real Light Dragon King is someone else at the moment. But on the off chance that this one hasn't actually lost his powers...

"What is this? You've gone all quiet! Ha ha ha! I'd expected you to show a bit more backbone, but look at you all quaking in your boots!"

"Silence, please. Master is currently deep in thought."

As I was racking my brain with Parallel Processing running to the absolute limit, Efil issued the dragon a warning on my behalf.

"How dare a lowly servant give orders to my noble se—"

"Silence, *please*." Efil repeated herself with emphasis. At the same time, her bow, Penumbra, burst into flames with a roar.

"I... Very well. Just a short while. Since I am magnanimous. I'll wait just a while."

"Your understanding is greatly appreciated. I thank you on my master's behalf."

Apparently, Efil had succeeded in negotiating enough time for me to finish thinking. *I've got to reward her later. And this isn't related to anything, but did the tip of the dragon's tail twitch when all the flames burst out? Yeah, let's say I imagined it.*

After a short while, I looked back up. "All right, I'm done. Thanks for waiting, everyone."

"Are you sure?" the dragon asked. "It hasn't even been ten seconds."

"Which was more than enough," I replied. "I've now got my thoughts in order."

Including the time that we had stopped in front of the room, we had lost almost half a minute. Without delay, I began shooting out orders through telepathy.

Rion and Ange, go ahead and regroup with Melfina and Gerard. The

staircase leading to Floor Seven is close. Leave the dragon to us.

::Okay! You take care, Kel-nii!::

::Gotcha. See ya soon, Kelvin!::

One of my companions ran off in a clap of thunder while the other disappeared without a sound.

“What?!”

The dragon failed to react in time, and the two had no problem shooting past him, heading for the staircase that led downward.

“Don’t worry about them,” I said. “We’ll take care of you ourselves.”

“You choose to split up your forces before facing me?! What arrogance! What hubris! Know that your lack of foresight shall be the cause of your own death!”

The white dragon drew to its full height and spread its wings—admittedly, it was an awe-inspiring sight. I lifted Black Staff of Disaster and Mad Holy Sword Clive as Efil also nocked a burning arrow and drew Penumbra.

“Being arrogant is fine with me. I simply do what I want.”

The reason I had chosen to fight the dragon king was because I had no guarantee I’d ever get to fight another one. If we ever found the Flame Dragon King, who had apparently murdered Efil’s mother, I would throw both hands into the air in celebration and immediately go for the kill. However, there were dragon kings who were friendly to people, and I couldn’t very well force a fight on them.

There were a total of eight elements in fire, lightning, wind, earth, water, ice, light, and darkness, meaning there were a total of eight dragon kings. I had no way of predicting how many of them I’d get to face.

On the other side were the Apostles—after Ange left, there were now nine of them. As the organization they belonged to was blatantly hostile towards Melfina, the chances of getting to fight all of them was very high. This was why I had decided to stay here and make the most of what seemed like a very limited opportunity.

As for whether this dragon was really a dragon king...well, all I could do was fight him and hope for the best. And when it came to the ancient heroes, I figured they’d probably be a threat if they were a whole party, but I couldn’t see the individual members measuring up to the other two options—it wasn’t even close. If that fight would help Setsuna and the others grow, they could have it. And if Melfina ate them up first, so be it.

On top of everything mentioned above, there was one more reason I chose to stay behind. Without further ado, I Summoned the dragons within my magic pool all at once.

Dahak, Boga, Mdofarak! Take down the Light Dragon King and usurp

his seat!

The room suddenly felt a lot more crowded as three dragons seemingly appeared out of thin air, shaking the air with their roars.

“So you are a Summoner,” the Light Dragon King boomed, sounding somewhat impressed. “And not just any Summoner, but one capable of leading so many of my brethren. I understand now why you sounded so confident before.”

The term “dragon” was used to refer to an entire race, but there was actually a huge variety, and one dragon could look vastly different from another. Some had scales that reflected what element they were best at, some had appearances that seemed to mimic things found in nature—such as rocks—and some defied general definitions that applied to most living creatures...like having three heads.

Needless to say, there was also a large spectrum in their temperaments and sizes. The Light Dragon King we were facing was very likely the first type—it had white scales that clearly indicated it specialized in White Magic. However, by being a black dragon that specialized in Green Magic, Dahak’s existence proved that exceptions did exist, reminding us not to let our guard down.

“You old geezer, I was listening this whole time. You sure were acting high and mighty with my brother, huh? You think you’re hot stuff?”

There was also one dragon who spoke in a way uncharacteristic of dragons. In fact, his lines sounded exactly like what a third-rate hoodlum would say when picking a fight he couldn’t win.

Dahak, what’s happened to you? You’ve completely taken on the personality of a bottom-tier hoodlum. Where has the you from our first encounter gone? I guess it doesn’t matter as long as it doesn’t affect his battle ability, though. I know he’s working hard to make Goldiana turn his way, though I really don’t want to know the specifics of what he’s working on.

The dragon king gave Dahak a look, then continued. “However, it seems clear that the dragons following you severely lack dignity. Such characters thinking they can fight on equal footing with my noble self can only be described as painfully misguided.”

“Hah! You sure know how to bark! Watch that you don’t swallow the bullshit you’re spouting!”

The massive forms of the dragons leaped into the air, signaling the start of the fight. If I were to order all of the dragons I knew by decreasing size, it would be Boga, Dahak, White Dragon, Mdofarak, then Rosalia. Of course, size was not all there was to power, but back during their Dragon Knight Order days, Boga had been the only one who could go toe-to-toe with Dahak.

“You lot, put your backs into it!”

“ROOOOAAAARRRRR!”

“GAAAWWRRRR!”

The jade-green stream coming from Dahak’s mouth joined Mdo’s Trinity Breath and Boga’s destructive roar to form a multicolored beam that blasted towards the Light Dragon King.

“ROOOOAAAARRRRRRRRR!”

The white dragon unleashed its own breath, one that looked like liquefied light, and the two beams clashed, creating shock waves that shook the room and sent showers of brilliant sparks flying everywhere. Looking from afar, the scene was so beautiful it reminded me of fireworks. The deafening sound was a bit unnecessary, though.

The dragon king was more powerful than I’d thought. By my rough visual estimate, its breath attack was equal to—no, slightly more powerful than the final beam unleashed by Diamante, the Divine Beast. At least, it was clearly powerful enough to hold its own in a three-against-one. I allowed myself to get my hopes up a little.

“WA HA HA HA HA! This is all you can do?! Your power seems so trivial compared to my Noble Breath!”

Wow, he even named his breath attack “noble.” But anyway...

Dahak and the gang were slowly but surely losing the breath showdown. In fact, the Light Dragon King felt so relaxed he could even speak with the torrent of light blasting from his mouth. However, this was still kiddie pool stuff. I sincerely hoped that wasn’t all he was capable of, because Efil could cut off that light breath attack with a single arrow. She wouldn’t even have to use Blue Flame.

KA-BOOOM!

“What?!”

An explosion went off suddenly as a Blaze Arrow shot up from a position near the ground, bisecting the Light Dragon King’s breath attack in a clean slice from an angle. Without slowing down in the slightest, the projectile rushed towards the white dragon’s astonished face.

“HMPH!”

Damn, he dodged that? I think this is my first time seeing an opponent who’s managed to evade an arrow shot by Efil while she was maintaining Covert Action. Normally, you’d need either Melfina’s overpowered stats or Sera’s intuition to pull off such a feat. Oh man, it’s really getting my expectations up!

“You sure are a force to be reckoned with, elven girl!”

“You damn right ’bout that! There ain’t no way you can beat sister Efil’s crazy firepower! She’s the most destructive person here, hands down!”

“Dahak, is that a compliment of Efil or a diss?”

“Wait, huh?! When’d you get there, brother?!”

It was getting a bit boring just spectating, so I'd used Fly to climb onto Dahak's back. Efil was similarly perched on top of Mdofarak.

"Roaaar..." Boga rumbled forlornly.

Ah, is he feeling left out? I mean, his usual rider, Gerard, isn't here, and there are only two of us, so it's not like there's anything we can do about it. He's just gonna have to deal with it.

"So, which is it, Dahak?"

"I was speaking out of nothing but respect and reverence, of course! I swear to Prettia-chan!"

"Uh, how am I supposed to take an oath sworn to Goldiana?"

"Master, it's fine. It didn't bother me. More importantly..." Efil switched to telepathy. ::This opponent can move faster than he seems::

I get the feeling he dodged with an ability, not physical stats.

Efil's Blaze Arrow had indeed gotten extremely close to landing a direct hit on the Light Dragon King. The instant before it did, however, the dragon's entire form seemed to have moved in the blink of an eye, almost as if it had used teleportation. He had not flexed any of his muscles and certainly did not flap his wings.

Just spitballing here, but since he's the dragon king of light, what if he can move at the speed of light?

::Even if so, the fact that he's not using it constantly must mean there are limitations::

That's true. And I can't imagine him having more Agility than Ange, though maybe that's a bit of an extreme comparison.

"Both of you leaped all the way up here? Are you truly a mere Summoner and servant?"

"What, haven't you heard? Summoners these days dabble in swordsmanship and hand-to-hand combat too. In fact, they prefer getting up close and personal with their opponents. And a servant shooting explosive arrows is nothing unusual."

"Huh? Um...uh? How baffling. Have I woken up in a different world? Is this hell?"

I mean, you sound so serious, but I honestly don't know what to tell you. All the maids in my house know how to fight, and sometimes they use a little too much fire when cooking. What's so strange about any of this?

"Very well; I apologize for my prior disrespect. It is now clear to my noble self that you are an opponent that I must get serious against."

Claaaang!

I thought I heard the soft tolling of a bell.

"Noble Aureola!"

An intense light burst out behind the Light Dragon King's back in the form of a giant nimbus like what a Buddha or saint might be

depicted with. The golden ring, which was inscribed with illegible symbols, rotated clockwise with regular ticks. The tolling I had heard had actually come from one of four large bells attached to the sides of the nimbus. Every tick the nimbus made rang the bells again.

“What do you think? This sublime and noble appearance is the reason my noble self is exalted as a god. If you bow to me now, with your head grinding into the ground, I may forgive you the disrespect you have shown me thus far.”

I scoffed. “Self-proclaimed god, has anyone ever told you that you really overuse the word ‘noble’?”

“Hm...so you still refuse to yield. Very well, you have chosen your lot.”

We had a real goddess in our party and we saw her every day, so all that talk about being noble and whatever wasn’t really hitting home for any of us. It was going to take a lot more than the dragon king lighting himself up like a Christmas tree to make us hesitate or feel scared.

Dragons, whoever beats him gets to become a dragon king. I know all of you were worrying about how to get stronger—here’s your opportunity!

::You sure don’t mince your words, brother...though you’re not wrong::

::Roaaar!::

::Raaawr!::

Yep, I know, you two. But don’t let that discourage you. First come, first served, all right? If you take your sweet time, Efil or I just might finish him off first!

::We just might!::

::Boga, Mdo, I’m aiming to become the Earth Dragon King, so I’ll let you two have this. Get fired up!::

The fact that Dahak wasn’t aiming to be the Darkness Dragon King was a bit of a surprise, but I let it slide. Also, I sincerely prayed that the other dragons would properly use their heads too instead of just getting fired up.

Well, I’ll give you guys a boost at the start. Here ya go, Dahak, Boga.

I cast Sonic Acceleration on Dahak to double his Agility and Vortex Armor on Boga to envelop him in a vicious squall.

::And I’ll help you, Mdo-chan::

Similarly, Efil cast Bursting Heat on Mdo-farak to double the damage dealt by her ranged attacks. Although the spell was Rank S and cost a ridiculous amount of MP, I actually quite liked it.

“All right! Let’s do this!” Dahak roared, signaling the start of their assault. He charged right in...with me still on his back.



Whoa, whoa, whoa! Were you listening to me?! I said use your head!
I protested indignantly. The way Dahak was charging in like a loose cannon, I was going to be collateral. *If you can't win alone, then work with the others! Come up with a plan or something! Who the hell told you to go in by yourself?!*

::I *did* use my head, brother! We dragons have been dreaming of defeating a dragon king all this time. So we asked our great senior, Clotho, to give us training. It was so harsh that we nearly vomited blood, but we pulled through! We got that special training in secret from you and old man Gerard!::

Great senior Clotho! Here I was, thinking you were just chilling out floating in the garden fountain, when you actually had a clone elsewhere and were up to something like this?!

I felt my slime buddy jiggling a little inside my robe as if responding to my surprise.

::Normally, I'd leave it to Boga to lead the charge, but now that my speed is doubled, I can't *not* do this! And with you on my back, I know I have nothing to fear!::

That's just a nicer way of saying you're dragging me into the fight!

::But brother, you say this all the time: "When fighting, use everything that's available." I can't imagine you being able to just sit back and watch us fight without getting involved yourself!::

I realized, to my chagrin, I couldn't refute any part of what Dahak was saying. If I did, my companions might worry about me to the point of subjecting me to the same all-hands-on-deck healing session they did in Gaun.

::I heard you yielded the fight with those half-baked heroes to m'lady too. Uh, are you feeling okay, brother? Did you eat something wrong?::

Why is it weird that I did that?

No fewer than five voices went, ::Huh?!:: in my head. That was more than there were people in the group currently with me! Getting such a reaction honestly made me feel stupid for holding myself back.

Just saying, no crying about it afterwards if I end up taking the finishing blow, okay?

::Now that's more like it! All right, we're doing this!:: Dahak cried as he accelerated even more.

"You are coming straight at me with your master on your back? You have guts, I'll give you that!"

The Light Dragon King unleashed another blindingly bright breath attack at us. Of course, he was hardly going to sit there and do nothing. I racked my brain for how to deal with it while feeling happy about the fact that this attack was clearly more powerful than the previous one.

So he wasn't serious at first! Yes!

Dahak wasn't slowing down in the slightest, meaning he had no intention of dodging the incoming attack—probably the right call, as the beam of light was so thick, I wasn't sure he could get out of its range in time even if he wanted to.

I see you're staying on course. How're you thinking of dealing with this attack?

::Based on what happened just now, I know my Corrosive Breath isn't enough to stop it! This is where you come in, brother! Go and do your thing!::

Multiple thoughts flashed through my head, such as *What happened to showing the results of your special training?!* and *Couldn't you have told me earlier?!* However, I couldn't say them out loud because I was busy feeling touched that I had such a considerate Follower. Of course, this was a big fat “no” in terms of strategy, so he was definitely going to get a talking-to later.

The incoming breath attack was powerful—so powerful, in fact, that I was quite certain it could even destroy Helix Barrier. That left us no choice but to offset it with our own attack, but it was almost already on top of us. The simplest solution was to bisect it with Boreas Death Scythe, but there wasn't enough time to cast the spell on my staff and physically swing it.

I guess this will be my first time actually using this in combat.

::Using what? Whatever it is, please hurry up! Like, seriously!::

Dude, if you're going to rush me, couldn't you have told me earlier? Anyway, I'm talking about my Unique Skill.

::Your... Okay, seriously, hurry, please!::

I could hear the panic in Dahak's tone even through the high-speed telepathy.

I was currently capable of casting Rank B spells instantly. Of course, a mere Rank B spell was nowhere near enough to shoot down what the Light Dragon King was throwing our way. That was why I was revealing Magic Overclock, the Unique Skill I had gained when I Evolved.

According to Melfina, the power of a spell normally depended on the caster's max MP and the amount of MP expended when casting said spell. The former was easy to understand—it was literally the number on the MP field in the Status window. There wasn't much anyone could do about their max MP at a moment's notice, which meant most of the variation in the power of a spell came from the latter: how much MP the caster used for the spell.

There were some exceptions, but the vast majority of spells had a set MP cost. For example, Wind, a Rank F Green Magic spell, required 2 MP. However, depending on how familiar the caster was with Wind,

it was possible to use more than 2 MP—this was called “overcharging” the spell. That was why I sometimes used more MP than was needed.

However, although the concept was easy to explain, actually employing it was much more difficult. This was akin to improving one’s swordsmanship without relying on the Sword Mastery skill. The tiniest bit of improvement required serious effort in understanding a spell and repeating it countless times. Even renowned mages only had two or three skills that they could overcharge.

“Dual Radiance Lance.”

The spell I chose to use now was Radiance Lance, one that I had been relying on since all the way back when I fought Viktor. The familiar lance of light flew straight into the thick incoming breath.

“You choose to use White Magic against me, the noble dragon who administers the element of light?! And with a Rank B spell, no less! You must be mocking me!”

The white dragon’s attack growing even more powerful from its anger was a nice surprise. I understood where it was coming from—my attack seemed far too paltry in comparison to his. And since he had such pride in his strength, it must have looked like I was messing around.

“I’m not, though. I chose this attack precisely because of my respect for your strength. Go on, I hope you like it!”

“Wh—”

Light clashed against light. The lance that seemed so tiny and flimsy in comparison bore straight through the large beam as it continued charging ahead at the speed of light. In contrast, the beam that had its center gouged out simply fell apart. Fragments fell indiscriminately all around the room, but we had a master archer on our side who shot them all down before they hurt any of us. I could feel Mdofarak’s eagerness to fire an attack over the Network, but because her next attack would deal double damage, she was likely holding back for a more opportune time.

“What? You’re not dodging it this time?”

“AAAARRRRRGHHHHH!”

The Light Dragon King roared in pain due to the giant hole that had opened up in his right shoulder. It wasn’t so much a hole as it was his whole arm merely hanging on by a sliver of skin at the armpit area, meaning it was pretty much entirely lost to him. After destroying Noble Breath, Radiance Lance had gone on to wreak havoc directly on the white dragon’s body.

“Guh! What... What did you do?! What was that power?!”

Even if I was incredibly familiar with the spell and overcharged it the normal way as best I could, I still would not have been capable of creating this much destruction with Radiance Lance. How did I

manage it, then? That's right, it was thanks to my Unique Skill, Magic Overclock. Simply put, it enabled me to overcharge any spell as much as I wanted—I could literally spend all the MP I had remaining on a single cast. "Dual" was the word I added on to indicate that I was doubling the destructive power of a spell. And its effect was as demonstrated. When used properly, a low-ranking spell could become even more powerful than a high-ranking one.

"Sorry to add more to your plate when you already seem to be struggling, but you ought to watch your feet too."

"What are y—" In a fluster, the Light Dragon King shot a glance downward. It was already too late, of course.

Creeeaaak.

Both of his legs were entangled in fully grown plants reaching all the way up from the ground, with thick branches that held him as tightly as a giant's hands. There was no doubt who the culprit was.

"I gotcha now! FALL!"

With his most charged shout of the day, Dahak made the plants abruptly pull the white dragon down. Caught by surprise, our enemy was nearly thrown off balance. However, he barely managed to live up to his kingly title—his wings shot wide open, helping him brace in midair even as blood fountained down from his wound.

"This is not enough...to bring down...my no—"

"Dual Air Pressure."

"Nooooooooo!"

Oof, he crashed hard. Air Pressure's kinda been turning useless these days, so I'm glad it's getting some time in the spotlight again.

"How... How daaaaare you!"

Despite being half-buried in the ground from the impact, the white dragon did his best to resist my Dual Air Pressure. Now that he was all covered in dust, though, there was nothing left of his self-proclaimed nobility, and his composure from before was nowhere to be seen. Even so, he was slowly yet surely clawing his way back out.

"Whoa?! This guy's seriously tough!"

The Light Dragon King was resisting not only Dual Air Pressure, but also the plants reaching out from the cracks in the broken ground to tie him down. Even together, they proved insufficient to hold him back—the powerful branches were being torn apart and the dragon king seemed about to spread his wings and take flight at any moment.

"Mere worms who dare to denigrate my noble self deserve death a thousand times over!"

Not only was he freeing himself, he unleashed a breath at those of us who were in the air while shouting in rage. He was trying really hard to come across as composed and in control of the situation, but sadly for him, I had already finished casting Boreas Death Scythe on

my staff. I swung it once, and his supposedly noble breath attack was split cleanly in two.

“Oh, oops.”

In a small corner of my mind, I realized that I’d messed up. The scattered rays of light smashed into the sculptures and ceiling murals that were probably one of a kind, thoroughly pulverizing the depictions of angels and gods and other *actually* noble beings.

This isn’t, like, a world treasure or anything, right? Uh...what a scourge this Light Dragon King is! He’s done the unforgivable!

All right, that was enough joking.

“Sorry to cramp your game when you’re doing so well, but here’s our next move.”

Suddenly, a giant shadow fell over the white dragon.

“RAAAWWRRRRR!”

“What?!”

A meteor clad in wind sharp enough to dice everything in its way fell from high above, roaring furiously. Of course, it was Boga. He was literally throwing his body into the fray, putting his faith in the toughness of his own skin, fully resolved to getting hurt. The way he curled up into a ball made him look like an armadillo. Okay, not really. Yes, he was rolled up, but that giant meteor was something else entirely.

“This is not enough t—”

Aaaaaand impact. The Light Dragon King was interrupted, smashed into the ground by the hammer that was Boga. The floor roiled as in an earthquake, thoroughly destroyed. The damage from Boga’s incredible mass had been doubled thanks to Dual Air Pressure, and he had been wearing a coat of wind that would absolutely shred anything that came close. I was glad that our entire team was up in the air. Truly. At this point, the whole thing about this place being a world treasure was already moot.

KLAAAANG!

“Roar?”

Once again, the sound of a bell tolled. *If this sound came from the mandala of bells on the Light Dragon King’s back, it means he—*

“This is but a gnat’s bite!”

“ROAR?!”

Boga, who had pretty much destroyed the entire floor, was suddenly blasted into the air. Specifically, in the direction where Dahak—and I, for the record—were.

Dahak, evade it! And Boga, brace yourself for impact! You’re gonna hit the ceiling!

::Yes, sir!::

::Roaaaar!::

Thanks to Sonic Acceleration, Dahak had no problem evading in time. And thanks to his Endurance stat, Boga got off largely unscathed too. The problem was what the state of the white dragon in the hole was. *I'm impressed he was able to throw Boga off despite being hurt, but—*

“You said you were a Summoner, did you not?”

I looked towards the voice and found the Light Dragon King with his razor-sharp claws already held at the ready. He was right before me, the shoulder that had been gouged out by Radiance Lance already healed without a scar, showing none of the wounds he should have been bearing from Boga's attack.

Did he move at light speed again? Is that bell the source of his healing? All sorts of possibilities presented themselves in my mind, but what I had to do at that moment was crystal clear.

“BROTHEEEEEER!”

An impact smashed into me with such force that I almost thought an explosion had gone off in my ear. It wasn't actually an explosion, but the sound of the Light Dragon King's claws catching me head-on. Dahak, whom I had kicked out of the range of the attack at the last possible second, shouted something, but I had no idea what he had said. *Use telepathy, dude.*

“I see. You managed to create a shield in the fraction of a second before my attack landed. Not only that, you even had time to do this.”

Mad Holy Sword Clive was protruding from the white dragon's right arm, plunged all the way in. I had thrown it on the spur of the moment, hoping the curses packed into its blade would affect our opponent to some degree.

I feel like I'm always throwing it around. Oh well, the target is not a girl this time, so why not go all out?

“Phew. I didn't think I'd let my guard down, but you really got me good.” I pushed aside the fragments of the wall I'd slammed into and took a better look at our enemy. Sure enough, aside from Clive being in his arm, the dragon looked entirely unhurt with his nimbus of light—*Noble Aureola, was it?*—still turning behind his back. *I seriously have no idea what that thing does.*

I brushed the dust off my clothes and fixed my grip on my staff.

Dahak, Boga, Mdofarak, I'm gonna get serious now, I warned them. I was done setting things up for my companions; it was about time for me to get a bit of the action myself.

“Interesting! That is a look that portrays the opposite of nobility, but I commend you for smiling in such a situation!”

“Cus I can't hold myself back any longer! How can I not smile when I'm having so much fun?!”

I leaped off the wall, throwing multiple Dual Radiance Lances at the same time. The dragon king unleashed a breath attack in response.

::Oh, Master, what a wonderful smile you have!::

Efil was so touched that she clapped a hand over her mouth. I could tell without looking. Her feelings of happiness were coming through loud and clear over the Network.

::Uh, sister Efil, I think you've been overly influenced by brother. No matter which way you see it, that's the smile of a madman....::

::Roaar....::

::Raaawr....::

The dragons sounded somewhat creeped out. Boga and Mdofarak were nodding furiously in agreement with Dahak's reply, but of course, I knew I was only imagining it. *You guys realize that even though I'm focusing on the fight, I can hear you and have Parallel Processing activated, right?*

::What an auspicious day it is! That's right, I have a great idea! Master once mentioned that where he's from, cooking red beans with rice is done to celebrate things! And I learned how to do so in Toraj!::

::Oh damn, sister Efil is on fire today!::

Aren't you too, Dahak?

"Hmph!"

"Hah!"

The white dragon swiped its tail at me so fast that wind screamed with its passage, but I chopped it off with Boreas Death Scythe. Blood fountained from the bisected appendage, leaving no doubt as to the severity of the wound. However, the wound fully healed only seconds later with the ringing of another bell.

After exchanging a few more blows with the Light Dragon King, I realized a few things. First, the four bells on his nimbus rang when they reached the twelve o'clock position, with there being roughly thirty seconds between each ring. Each time a bell went off, all of the dragon's wounds disappeared. I had sliced off his limbs and wings several times now, and Clive was inflicting every curse it could, but each time a bell tolled, everything seemed to revert as if time itself were being rolled back.

Whatever the Light Dragon King was doing to move at the speed of light, he clearly could not use it repeatedly in quick succession. However, from what I could tell, each time the bell rang, it not only healed him but also allowed him to use his movement ability again. It was particularly troublesome that he could use this to evade *and* attack. It meant that Air Pressure wasn't going to be much help, and I would be in a very bad place if I took even one direct hit from him.

Of course, I was all for a long, drawn-out fight because it meant I got to have more fun, but things were going to get worse for me as time passed. That left me with only one option: to defeat the Light Dragon King within the thirty-second window between rings. I had

also considered destroying his mandala, but he was doing a good job of dodging the attacks that he really needed to. Now that he had his head in the game, he was a rather troublesome opponent. The answer lay not in one big attack, but in first whittling down his mobility.

“Dual Obsidian Edge times four!” I cried, generating blades far tougher and sharper than anything I had previously made with the spell.

Klang!

The ringing of the gong signaled the start of my race against time. I immediately sent flying scythes using Boreas Death Scythe and cast Air Pressure to rob the newly healed dragon of his ability to move, then bombarded him with Radiance Crossfire. I left just the tiniest of gaps for him to escape as a way to guide him towards the wall, then lastly...

“Run him through!”

The four Dual Obsidian Edges that had been on standby blasted forward, impaling the dragon. I didn’t need all four to land; only one was enough. Now he was nailed to the wall, completely open to attack. In other words, we could serve him up however we wanted to.

::Mdo-chan, Master did not tell you to hold back. In other words, you are free to join in at any moment. And this seems like the perfect time, does it not?::

::RAAAAWWRRRRR!::

What looked like a super colorful bullet flew in from beyond my field of vision.



The violent fighting just now had left the large room completely trashed, almost every last artistic detail thoroughly mauled and destroyed. In fact, the room itself seemed on the verge of collapse. We were fine because I had shored it up with Green Magic, but it was clear that not using large area-of-effect attacks had been the right call.

“I’m terribly sorry, Master. Should I not have intervened?”

“No, no, it was the right call. If you hadn’t jumped in, I would have finished things myself.”

If I was the one who finished off the Light Dragon King, then none of the dragons would have gotten the chance to Evolve. I cut off Efil’s apology and praised her instead while using the Clean spell to get off the dust and debris that was covering the two of us. She looked down, blushing slightly. *Could she be any cuter?*

“Mm, to think you lot actually managed to take down an ancient dragon as noble as myself. Now that I am no longer noble, I cannot help but express my respect for your power.”

For some reason, the former Light Dragon King joined our

conversation. There was a saying that “yesterday’s enemy is now today’s friend,” but it was quite jarring to witness such incredible adaptability in person.

Long story short, it was Mdofarak who had dealt the final blow that finished off the Light Dragon King, using a new breath attack that she had developed secretly with Efil’s help. She had taken what was originally an area-of-effect attack and concentrated it into the shape of a bullet—this was the colorful bullet that had zipped across my field of vision when I’d had the white dragon pinned against the wall.

As a result of packing all that energy into such a small form, her attack boasted much higher speed and destructive power. Mdo’s three heads had thrown their attacks together, creating a bullet containing fire, ice, and lightning that had been further bolstered by Efil’s Bursting Heat spell. The white dragon’s ring of light, and all the bells on it, had been pulverized.

“So you’re not noble anymore?”

“Indeed. Going forward, I am but a simple white dragon. Call me by my name, Murmur.”

He had been dragged down from his seat as a dragon king, but he was very much alive and well. When his Noble Aureola was destroyed, he had taken it as a sign of his loss and surrendered to Mdofarak. And now that he was no longer a dragon king, Murmur no longer went on about being disrespected, and there was no need to fight him any further. That’s right, I no longer had a reason to fight!

But still, his name is such a mismatch with... Yeah, okay, let’s not finish that thought.

“How is Mdo-chan doing?” Efil asked me.

“She’s still sleeping in my magic pool. It’s probably gonna take her a while, like it did for Sera.”

The lucky winner who was now a Light Dragon King had been Unsummoned and was resting within my magic pool. Murmur surrendering and acknowledging her power had kicked off the process of Evolution.

“*Rawr...*”

Every once in a while, I felt thoughts about wanting to eat something sweet coming through. I supposed it couldn’t be helped with her being a girl and all. My hope was that she might have learned how to transform into human form after her Evolution. If so, I planned on asking Efil to bake her a mountain of sweets.

“Still, you know you already lost to the current Light Dragon King ages ago and died, right?” Dahak, who had assumed human form, asked Murmur. “How’re you alive again? And as a dragon king, to boot.”

“Mm, are you the black dragon from just now? That is a fair

question. You are correct; my ignoble self did lose to a subordinate and lost his life.”

“Then it was true. So...”

“Why...indeed? Even I do not know.”

“Huh?! The fuck?!”

“I do not know what I do not know—what do you want me to say? When I woke up from my long slumber, I suddenly found all of you destroying my tombstone. Mm? Wait, *my* tombstone? I...do not remember knowing this before I died.”

Dahak slapped a hand to his forehead. “Oh god, so he’s slept so long he’s gone senile!”

“Hold on, let’s first take stock of what we *do* know,” I said.

When he was alive, Murmur had been a dragon king who was on friendly terms with Deramis. He’d had a contract with a previous pope that placed him in a relationship with Deramis similar to what the Water Dragon King had with Toraj. However, during the era of the Great War, one of his men had betrayed and killed him in a surprise attack.

“Technically, you don’t *need* a dragon king’s acknowledgment to usurp their seat—you can outright kill one,” he explained. “When that happens, the ancient dragon who’s the closest in power to the deposed king will gain the title.”

According to Dahak, that new Light Dragon King had fallen off the radar, rarely making contact with other dragons. I made a mental note to ask Melfina if she knew anything the next time we met.

We asked him one more time, but Murmur confirmed that he had no idea how or why he had come back to life. For some reason, he knew that these were the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits and that this room had been built as his mausoleum, as if the knowledge had been planted in his head. The mausoleum had most likely been created by the Deramisians as a sign of their respect and affection for him, so when we destroyed it, he had unconsciously flown into a rage.

Uh, hold on, does that mean...I’m in the wrong here? I gotta apologize to Pope Philip and reimburse him afterwards.

When I bowed to Murmur in apology, he waved it off. “It is fine. My ignoble self is now alive and well. I will forgive you on behalf of that deadweight Philip.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” I replied, bowing once more.

“Thank you for your kindness, Murmur-sama,” Efil echoed, also bowing.

“Mm. And, uh, the pretty attendant there? This is entirely unrelated, but kindly please inform me ahead of time if you plan on making loud noises. I have a trauma from when I was alive that makes me quite sensitive to them. I will be fine as long as you give me

advance notice, however.”

“I sincerely apologize for causing you such discomfort.”

Oh, so that’s why he started when Efil activated Penumbra.

“Perhaps the reason I remained a dragon king was because I died as a dragon king. I cannot be sure, though; there is no precedent for a dead dragon coming back to life that I know of. Unfortunately, I do not think I can be of much help in regards to getting to the bottom of this phenomenon. My apologies.”

“Oh, no, that’s totally fine. I’m pretty sure the culprit is currently on the lowest floor of the dungeon, after all.”

“What?”

I turned to look at the far end of the room where a staircase led to the next floor down.



At the same time, the current Heroes of Deramis were running frantically through Floor Five.

“Go on, run, run! The path’s already been opened up for you! Faster! And keep smiling! I’ll take care of the monsters you miss, so don’t worry about them!”

“I... No more...!”

“*Gawr!*”

“Nana, you can’t give up!”

“Wait a moment; I’ll heal your stamina!”

“Phew, I’m glad I had another Grave Death Ogre. What? It’s so I can, uh, focus ahead of us!”

When Sera had finished creating her army of blood skeletons and caught up with the Heroes who had gone ahead, she’d suddenly decided to give them a taste of her own demonic brand of training. Her instructions were simple and clear: she and her Hades’s Sanguine Army were running in formation behind the Heroes, chasing them at a certain speed, and they had to maintain their distance. If the red skeletons got close enough, they would start “prodding” the Heroes with the tips of their swords. Consequently, they had to run at least as fast as the skeletons were going.

At the same time, they had to defeat the masses of high-ranking monsters that Kelvin’s group had left when they had passed through earlier. At their heels were Sera and the army of skeletons; at their front were endless hordes of undead enemies. As they were running pretty much at top speed, they had to constantly maintain their stamina and brace themselves to dive into what looked like an unending sea of grotesque monsters.

The only silver lining was that they had a clear path to take, thanks to Rion, and that the path helped to repel the monsters

somewhat.

“Good going, everyone! When you get through this, you will become a new you! My intuition tells me so!”

Basically, Sera had seen Kelvin acting as the Heroes’ trainer back in Toraj and had wanted to try doing the same thing. This was the result.

“Kanzaki-kun, thank— AHHH!”

For Nana, who was terrible with horror and gore, this wasn’t just training anymore—it was a tribulation. She had started getting somewhat used to seeing skeletons because of Miyabi’s magic, but real-life ghosts were just too much for her. And the farther down they went, the more grotesque the monsters’ appearances became. She was being tempered through this training in more ways than one.

“Um...dearest sister Sera, am I supposed to be on this side?” Shutola, who was on her teddy bear, asked as she and her Guards ran alongside Sera’s group.

“At your current strength, there’s not much meaning in fighting Rank B monsters, is there?” Sera replied. “Oh, but I feel some pretty powerful presences on the floor below. You wanna go up front after we head down?”

Shutola nodded deeply, racked with a sense of guilt from seeing the Heroes forced to maintain their breakneck pace.



The deepest floor of the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits, Floor Ten, was where the beloved spear of the previous Goddess of Reincarnation, Elearis, was enshrined. Those who had passed through the rest of the dungeon to reach this floor would be surprised by how small it was, as it was just one large, open room. The white-and-silver design that characterized the Great Cathedral aboveground was found here as well, creating a holy area where worship seemed the only appropriate thing to do. Any passionate Rinne believers who beheld the sight would undoubtedly burst into tears from joy and ecstasy, possibly even swooning with emotion. That was how beautiful and majestic the place was.

A gigantic sculpture of a woman who looked markedly different from Melfina towered at the far end of the room, and at her feet was an altar that was white without blemish. This whiteness, which seemed capable of swallowing and overwhelming anything, evoked both healing and awe in any who saw it.

The most attention-grabbing part of the room, however, was Sister Atra, who was lying on top of the altar. She bore no external wounds, her clothing appeared untouched, and there were no restraints holding her down. She was sleeping on the altar—there was literally nothing

more that could be said of her situation.

“Oh my goddess, there’s Atra! What a relief. I’m so glad she’s all right!” Sister Ria, who had been saved by Melfina and Gerard on Floor Eight and accompanied them ever since, placed a hand on her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. Normally, she would not have been brought there since she was not a combatant, but when she had said the word “sacrifice,” all such considerations had become moot.

After being rescued, she had explained that she’d coincidentally heard her kidnapper let the word slip. If she was to be believed, that meant every second counted. Melfina and Gerard were the closest to Floor Ten, and they could not afford to waste time first escorting Ria back aboveground. As such, they decided to bring her along by having her ride on Gerard’s shoulders. She suffered a very shaky ride but otherwise reached their destination looking none the worse for wear.

No one else was in the room with Atra, and there were no signs that anyone was hiding there. It seemed like a one-in-a-thousand chance to rescue Atra. It was practically a miracle from the heavens! Or so Ria believed.

“This is definitely a trap,” both Melfina and Gerard said at the same time.

“Huh?!” Ria turned around in surprise at hearing the opposite opinion of what she had been thinking.

Melfina switched to using telepathy. ::I sense several individuals who do not seem to belong here. I imagine their intention is to jump us when we approach Sister Atra, but they are doing a terrible job of hiding their killing intent. I can’t imagine an Apostle being so sloppy, but...::

::It’s not as if we can remain standing here either. Should I go?::

::Hm...no, I will. You focus on protecting Ria.::

Melfina walked forward with steady steps, Holy Lance Luminary held at the ready. Gerard, who had every faith in the goddess and prioritized his charge’s safety above all else, turned his eyes away from the part of her where the hopes and dreams of all men were packed and focused on carrying out his duty as a knight. Ria, for her part, was simply praying to her goddess, looking very flustered and distressed.

When Melfina was halfway between the staircase and the altar, she could already see Atra’s face in detail. The nun had a calm and peaceful expression, as if having a very pleasant dream. Her chest was rising and falling at a steady rate, indicating that she was alive and had no problem breathing.

::No attack yet. I feel the gazes, but the enemy is still waiting.::

::Wouldn’t it be simpler to blow them all away with a large spell, Princess? You know, like my king always does.::

::That's an option too, but I'd prefer to avoid it until I can be sure of Atra's safety. Also, this place is considered an important chamber, a holy room, to Deramis. I don't want to destroy it without reason. I will also ensure that every last reprobate who dares sully the sanctity of this place meant to entomb the dead will meet their end on my lance!::

::Oh, wow, uh...far be it from me to stop you.::

Something seemed to have set Melfina off today, as she was uncharacteristically goddess-like. However, we must not forget that her possible future husband had completely trashed an entire mausoleum, tombstone and all, on Floor Six. Of course, even if she were to hear of this matter, the goddess would surely backtrack and forgive him with a laugh. As is often said, love truly is blind.

::I'm almost there....::

When Melfina was only two or three steps away from Atra, the killing intent emanating from all around her abruptly exploded in intensity. All attempts at secrecy were dropped as magic spells of fire, lightning, and every other element shot towards her from the shadows of the nearby pillars and ornaments, with more than a few threatening to hit Atra as well. Every one of the projectiles was Rank A in strength, and their numbers revealed there were eight assailants. Judging by how coordinated they were and how quickly they chanted new spells, all eight were rather skilled.

“Celsius Briar.”

However, these were but normal people, and they could not have encountered a worse opponent than Melfina. The beautiful briars of ice that Melfina generated formed a small dome around her that blocked the multi-elemental bombardment, not allowing even the shock wave of their impacts through. In fact, the spells failed to so much as leave scratches on the briars themselves.

That was not all Celsius Briar did either. Grunts of surprise rang out as the briars crept over the ground, sweeping towards the assailants' feet. The moment their feet were caught, they were tied up so thoroughly that they could not move a finger.

::And that's the fight over!::

::Um, Princess...didn't you say you didn't want to destroy the place without reason?::

Melfina hummed cheerfully as she dispelled the dome of briars, revealing that her spell had entirely covered the ceiling, walls, pillars, and floor of the room, stopping only short of Gerard's feet. The room now looked like a massive, majestic ice cathedral.

“What?! I, uh, huh?!” Sister Ria was shaking, both in voice and in body. It wasn't clear whether it was because she felt cold, overwhelmed, or something else.

::I suppose this is my first time showing you this spell, Gerard. Heh heh, don't underestimate the spell Kelvin's family crest is based on. It knows how to differentiate between friend and enemy. It played a huge role during the Demon Lord fight, and it's protecting this room at this very moment.::

::Interesting. That does sound like a spell with high utility. So, what can you tell us about the enemy?::

In response, eight briars each pulled out a humanoid form from the crackling field of ice—all that remained of their assailants.

::They seem to be rather high-ranking mages, but they differ greatly in both outfit and race. It's like particularly skilled individuals were gathered from a number of different countries.::

::This again? You think they're companions of those on Floor Eight?::

::Hard to say. We never did see anyone resembling the Apostles, so....::

::Hmm....::

"Um..." Sister Ria spoke up as if she could not wait any longer, interrupting the telepathic conversation between Mel and Gerard. "Are we, um, fine now? As in, can we help Sister Atra now?"

"Oh." Gerard started. "I suppose so. Yes, let's waste no time waking her—"

Slash. Thud.

Just as he was turning towards Ria, who was still on his shoulders, something fell past his field of view and hit the ground. When he looked up, the face that he expected to see was no longer there. Blood stood out starkly against the nun outfit that Ria was wearing. In other words, what he had just seen fall down...

A cheery "Aha!" sounded from behind his back.

Gerard turned around to find Ange standing there in her Assassin outfit, a look of sheer ecstasy on her face as if she were drunk on the smell of blood.



Gerard immediately fired off an "Ange, what have you done?!:: through the Network, ready to dive into battle depending on her answer.

That was how incensed he was. After all, Ange had activated Covert Action to get as close as possible without alerting Gerard or Melfina in order to behead the target they were supposed to protect, even using Assassin's Strike so that her surprise attack would deal more damage. Needless to say, she had not given them any prior notice.

::Phew. Gerard-san, that woman....::

::Wha— Hmph!::

However, Gerard's attitude did a one-eighty an instant after he received Ange's telepathic message. He grabbed the headless body on his shoulders and threw it as far as he could—without hesitation, without mercy, and using every ounce of his strength. Ria's body slammed into the ice wall and disappeared within a cloud of dust.

What Ange had just shared with Melfina and Gerard was the shocking revelation that Sister Ria was actually an Apostle. Ange had uploaded a detailed report about her to the Network, and Gerard had determined it to be trustworthy intel. There had been almost no time lag between her passing the information along and Gerard taking action—it had been a transmission that took full advantage of one of the perks of the Summoning skill.

::How surprising. Never did I imagine one of the Apostles would be disguising herself as a nun at an orphanage. That said, Ange, lass, couldn't you have told us earlier? I think you shaved a few years off my life span there!::

::Sorry, Gerard-san. She's really sensitive to what people are feeling, and I wanted to catch her in a perfect surprise attack. I'm pretty sure that if you had hesitated even a bit, she would have caught on.::

Gerard couldn't help but think Ange still looked like she had really enjoyed it. In fact, there was a slight blush on her cheeks.

::I now understand the situation. However, according to this information, this is—:: Just as Melfina stood protectively in front of Sister Atra, a voice sounded from near the ground.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Why, why, why do I have to suffer like this?"

The source of the voice was Ria's head, which still lay where it had rolled after being chopped off by Ange. She sounded like she was in pain, but she was supposed to be *dead* considering the state she was in. Her being able to speak was itself an abomination.

Immediately after hearing the voice, Ange mercilessly threw another kunai at Ria's remains. With a dull *thud*, the blade pierced the body of the girl who was supposed to be dead.

"Oh, stop it with the theatrics. A vampire like you won't die from this. Did you think you could trick me by just changing the color and style of your hair?"

The voice sounded surprised. "What?"

"Okay fine, have it your way." Ange shrugged and threw two more kunai knives with deadly precision. However, these failed to land. Ria's head crumbled into countless bats that burst into flight, rushing towards the cloud of dust within which her body lay. Soon enough, a humanoid figure could be seen standing up within the

cloud.

“Assassin, has anyone ever told you that you’re pretty dry? I confess, I’m pretty surprised to find out you’re even more serious and more of a goody two-shoes than Baal-chan is. Aren’t you curious why I’m here?”

Ria’s tone had undergone a drastic transformation. The timid and nervous way she’d spoken at the orphanage had turned clingy and sultry. It sounded seductive, making for a very stark contrast with earlier.

“Are you disappointed? Then I hope you die nursing that disappointment. I’ll happily keep your head!”

“Oh my, what a deranged thing to say. Is that your true self? But I don’t think you can win. Not against me, the queen of vampires and their progenitor, the Seventh Seat among Goddess Elearis’s Apostles, Estoria Kranweltz!”

Ria—no, Estoria—made her appearance, causing a cacophony of loud, high-pitched cracks with her careless trampling of the briars on the ground. Her previously chestnut-colored hair had turned a golden blonde, and her nun outfit was torn up in a highly provocative way, greatly revealing her cleavage and bearing a deep slit that ran all the way up her leg. It was a truly scandalous look, but Gerard was not one who would let his guard down in such a situation. No, it was more accurate to say that he *couldn’t* let his guard down. That was how threatening Estoria’s presence was. And, of course, because Ange’s smile had taken on a very dangerous glint.



“Aha ha, thanks as always for the courteous self introduction, even though no one asked.”

“Well, just think of it as the way I do things. I accomplish everything I do by perfectly embodying the kind of woman that men want. It’s because I am this way that I make sure to treasure my true self. You may be good at gathering and manipulating information, but I’m confident that I’m far better than you at handling men and love affairs. That gentlemanly mister over there! Gerard-sama! I couldn’t help but be smitten by your kind consideration for others and your striking boldness. Would you like to spend some time with me?”

“I think I’ll pass. With you, I feel like I might get burned.”

“Aw, what a pity. You’re such a wonderful man.”

Estoria’s eyebrows furrowed as if she really did feel disappointed. Perhaps she had actually been serious in her invitation. Turns out Gerard was a pretty popular guy. Now, whether that made him happy or not was a different matter entirely.

“We’ve secured Sister Atra,” Melfina said, placing a hand on the shoulder of the sleeping nun. With a forceful look at Estoria, she asked, “Where have you hidden the real Sister Ria?”

“My oh my, to think a goddess of all people could make such a mistake. I’m going to correct your misconception here and now. You ready? Listening? Sister Ria *is* me. It was me all along. So there’s no ‘real’ Sister Ria. I shortened ‘Estoria’ to ‘Ria.’ Simple, right? I got the idea from Analyzer. I really did get taken under Atra’s wing, and I really did do my best as a nun. Oh, but keep all this secret from Atra. She taught me a whole bunch of things, and to be honest, she made the church a comfortable place to stay in. She’d be shocked to learn I’m a vampire.”

“To think a vampire would choose to live in a church filled with crosses and holy water and natural light... I can’t even laugh.”

Vampires were such a powerful race that they were often considered a subspecies of demon. They possessed tough bodies overflowing with magic and the ability to convert others to undead members of their own race by sucking their blood. For all their power, however, they also possessed a lot of weaknesses, with the most iconic being their fear of crosses and running water and their inability to withstand sunlight. Consequently, the majority of vampires lived in the underground world where the sun never shone: Abyssland.

“I am a vampire who worships a goddess and receives Her blessing. I suppose you can call me an odd case among my kind, but thanks to this, there’s a lot that I’ve overcome. Now, I find churches the most comfortable places to be in. And, um, goddess? There’s something else you’re misunderstanding.”

“Which would be?”

“You haven’t *quite* secured Atra yet.”

A foul sensation traveled up the arm that Melfina was touching Atra with. It felt cold and disgusting, almost as if she were touching an evil spirit directly.

Atra sat up on the altar, an enormous specter attached to her back.

“You see, that altar is for offering sacrifices. Looks to me like the dungeon boss thinks you’re stealing its virgin maiden, and, well, it doesn’t like that *at all*.”

Melfina instantly retracted her hand and cast a curse-dispelling spell on herself. ::It’s a lich king! Gerard, Ange, I’ll focus on exorcizing it! I’m sorry, but you’ll have to take care of the Apostle yourselves!::

::Understood! We’ll handle her!::

::Sure! Just wait to see her head!::

One of the replies sounded somewhat disturbing, but Melfina paid it no mind and immediately shifted into action. The wriggling branches of Celsius Briar erupted to form a wall of ice separating her and Estoria, cutting the room in half so that neither could interfere with the other. The deepest floor of the dungeon was much smaller than the other floors, but because the room made up the entire floor, there was still plenty of room for both sides to fight. The main reason Melfina did this was to prevent Estoria from coming into contact with Atra.

“My, my, my! You don’t have to hate me *that* much, do you?” Estoria called to the other side of the wall, sounding hurt. The briars at her feet were starting to wind their way up her legs, but she paid them no mind. “It looks like breaking that wall’s going to take quite a bit of effort. I suppose I’m going to have to finish you two off first, then.”

“You say it so casually, but do you think it’s going to be that easy?” Ange said.

“Are *you* sure about this, Assassin? You think you, the Eighth Seat, can beat me, the Seventh Seat?”

Estoria’s face still had the same seductive smile as before. The smile on Ange’s face, in contrast, had the corners of her lips drawn up in a manner very similar to a certain battle junkie.

“What was it you always said to Condemner? Ah, that a one-rank difference isn’t worth much. What, are you acting tough because you’re losing your nerve? Estoria-chan?”

“You’re right, I do say that. Though it annoys me to admit it.”

Estoria leaped into the air, not hampered in the least by the briars clinging to her legs. The few dark shapes that flapped around her indicated she had gotten free by simply converting her feet into bats.

Now, jet-black wings that bore a strong resemblance to Sera's protruded from the back of her torn nun habit.

"The briars were annoying, so I hope you don't mind me doing this from the air."

The vampire stuck a hand in between her voluptuous breasts and pulled out a white staff. Ample though it was, her chest was nowhere near large enough to hide such a sizable weapon. Then again, it was only a minor detail that hardly surprised anyone this late in the game.

"This staff's name is Shion. It's a stud that raises my MP by feeding on my sexual desire. Look at it; isn't it beautiful? Don't you think it's perfect for me?"

"Gross. It's just gross."

"Aw, looks like we have a difference of opinion, Assassin. How sad."

Ange had seen the white staff before. It was back while on a mission with the Third Seat of the Apostles, Jildora, though where it had been will remain unmentioned. Everything about it, including its superficial beauty, repulsed her.

Estoria raised Shion up high. "Well, it's about time I kill you both. Salvation Ray!"

FLASH!

The large cathedral was suddenly covered by a rain of burning light. Rays so bright as to blind all onlookers fell down without mercy. The truly terrifying part about the spell was that each and every one of those streaks of light dealt as much damage as a Rank S spell. The Celsius Briar covering the floor was smashed into nothing, due to either how high Estoria's Magic stat was or Shion's effect. Either way, when the light finally faded away, not a single thorn was left on the ground.

"Well, I'll be! Now that was frightening! What was that? It was as powerful as Efil's arrows!" Gerard lowered the shield he had been huddling under to ride out the barrage. Despite his words, however, the massive shield that had been retempered by Kelvin multiple times did not look particularly damaged. Gerard himself, of course, was also unscathed.

"I really have taken a liking to you, Gerard-sama! There aren't many who remain so lively after being showered in my love!" Estoria licked her lips as her eyes took on the look of a bird of prey.

An indescribably cold chill ran down Gerard's back. He recognized those eyes—they overlapped with those from the forceful gaze of a certain big-boned (fe)male who shall not be named and invoked nothing but terror for him.

However, Estoria could not afford to only stare at Gerard.

KLANG!

Ange had used Uncontainable to ride out Salvation Ray, then used Sky Walk to close in on Estoria's position in the air. A high-pitched note rang out as dagger met staff.

"Aha ha! I'm surprised you managed to block it!"

"I knew you'd slip through my spell and come after me!"

As a vampire, Estoria's Strength stat was quite high. In fact, hers was even higher than Ange's, and one swing from her staff proved enough to send the other girl flying through the air. Of course, Ange was not one to simply take things passively; she immediately activated Sky Walk and regained her balance. The next instant, kunai and spears of light—the attacks that both sides found the most suitable—clashed in a barrage.

This exchange was furious in the extreme. Ange perfectly dodged every ray of the shower of light that fell literally at the speed of light as Estoria deftly used her ability to turn into bats to prevent a single kunai from making contact. The death of one or two bats did not seem to affect her in any way. At this point, it had become a meaningless war of attrition.

"Poison on your knives? Isn't that a bit underhanded even for you, Assassin? And that black hood of yours looks soooo boring."

"Aha ha, you do realize you're talking to an *assassin*, right? And I'll have you know, my hood is the epitome of fashion!"

At the same time, the two were also exchanging a somewhat—no, a *very*—immature verbal tête-à-tête. Their fight was more than fierce enough to offset what they were saying, though.

"And now you're looking away from me?" This time, it was Gerard making a move. He had climbed a ladder on the wall made of kunai thrown by Ange and now leaped out into the air with far more momentum than one might expect from a suit of armor, Dainsleif already in midswing.

"Oh, hardly! I never let down my guard around guys."

Something appeared between Gerard and Estoria. No, it wasn't just one something, but multiple somethings. Black forms spread wings of the same color and rushed to intercept Gerard.

"Hmph!"

The swing of the greatsword killed off one of whatever they were, but then Gerard succumbed to the force of gravity and plunged to the ground. The rest dove after him at incredible speed in pursuit.

"Did you just kill a vampire lord with one strike? They're my most powerful minions! I'm falling for you more and more, Gerard-sama!"

Vampire lords were a superior race of vampires. They were as powerful as archdemons, so if one appeared aboveground, it would undoubtedly be classified as a Rank S monster. They were beings to be feared.

“Shouldn’t you do something about that falling-in-love-so-easily issue?”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from. All right, that’s enough. Euthanasia!” A coffin-shaped barrier appeared around Estoria. At that moment, she let up her attacks, and Ange found her own attacks shut out.

“What... What are you doing?”

“Well, you know...in exchange for being really tough, Euthanasia makes it so that even I can’t attack anyone. I just wanted to catch my breath, that’s all. We’ve been going at it for quite a while now, and it didn’t seem like it’d end anytime soon.”

“What, you want to have a chat? After all this time?”

Even while replying, Ange threw a knife tagged with an explosive talisman straight at Estoria’s face. It exploded the moment it touched the coffin but did not even leave a scratch.

Estoria continued talking, not bothered in the slightest by the attack. “You know, the vampire lords that I just sent after Gerard-sama have all died and turned to ash before. I’m talking way back in the past when Demon Lord Gustav was taking over Abyssland. But then I revived them. I brought them back to life.”

“Guess you’re not called Reviver for nothing.”

“This is actually a pretty incredible ability, you know? Those I drink blood from turn into my kin, but those I feed my blood to return to life. That is what my Unique Skill, Uprising, does. There are a lot of little conditions and whatnot, of course. For example, I need the target’s actual body—or ashen remains, in the case of my minions. The eight that I had set on Melfina were all great champions from the age of the Great War that still had bodies in good condition—I was pretty strict in my evaluation! After all, I had all the options I wanted down here; it’s practically a treasure trove.”

Estoria smiled bewitchingly as Gerard and the vampire lords clashed beneath her.

“I couldn’t help taking a few trophies home, if you know what I mean. And my latest hobby is watching other people fight from inside this coffin. Sweating is so yuck, right?”

“Aha ha, in your case, I think you could do with a little exercise. To shed a few pounds of useless fat.”

“These aren’t useless. They’re embodiments of love.”

Suddenly, a huge crowd of individuals from various races began emerging from Estoria’s coffin, every last one having freshly come back to life.



Estoria was born a bottom-tier vampire in a slum somewhere in

Abyssland. She did not know her father's face or name, and her mother was a prostitute who, being a hard worker, would sometimes leave the house unattended for days on end. As a result, Estoria grew up without knowing parental love. Perhaps that was why she became so fanatical about pursuing love, something she thought everyone else had. However, her fellow slum dwellers were all coarse and simple and only occupied with getting through each day. There was nothing for her in a town where everyone was obsessed with themselves.

"This isn't where I belong."

When she came to that realization, Estoria left home and set out on a journey. She had no particular attachment to her home, and her memories were dull and gray—there was nothing to hold her back. She did not even leave a note, let alone bid anyone farewell.

Abyssland was a harsh place to live in, much more so for someone who was a bottom-tier vampire *and* a teenage girl. It was only through sheer luck that she survived. In the next town, which she barely reached alive, she caught the eye of a noble. Being in her midteens, Estoria was beautiful and had developed a very sexually attractive appearance. The noble, who clearly had ulterior motives, immediately brought her back to his mansion and employed her as a servant.

Despite the twisted nature of her circumstances, Estoria found happiness for the first time in her life. The noble plied her with clothes she had never worn before, good food, a warm bed, and so many other things. Even though all of these things were but matters of course in his house, they filled Estoria, the girl who had only known life in the slums, with satisfaction and delight.

In order to repay just a little of the favor she had been shown, she threw herself into her duties and constantly gave thought to what would make the noble happy. Eventually, he was all she could think about. In other words, she had fallen for him. Gratitude gradually shifted into a desire to make him turn her way, and she became obsessed with molding herself into the noble's ideal woman. As a result, she not only learned how to read the slightest changes in people's feelings, but also learned how to create a fictional persona that she could act out so perfectly as to convince herself it was her true self. All for the sake of obtaining ever deeper love.

The noble, naturally, greatly rejoiced at her efforts. Of course he did: his ideal woman was there in front of his eyes. It did not take long for the two to reciprocate each other's feelings, and they enjoyed days of bliss. However, it did not last long. The noble's wife felt her position was threatened and schemed to secure the house's riches for herself. Eventually, she enacted her plan, and her husband was assassinated.

"Oh no! I've got to find my next love!"

After killing the wife to avenge the nobleman, Estoria realized that there was nothing more she could do for him. That moment, her love for him faded like the setting sun. Why dwell on a past love when she could go in search of a new one?

So, this love-starved vampire set out again, armed with the nice clothes and accessories the noble had given her and the skills and techniques she had picked up trying to win his love. That, and some of the assets from the mansion. By now, she was no longer a bottom-tier vampire.

Then came a slew of countless fateful encounters. Estoria had possessed the Charm Eye skill since birth, but never once had she used it on a lover. What she sought was love from the heart, not convenient puppets to listen to orders. At the end of the day, what she cared about was that the other person saw the “true” her.

Due to her disposition for easily falling in love, she found it almost everywhere she went. From mercenary to statesman, bandit, wealthy merchant, traveler, and everything in between. The vast majority were humanoids, but she accepted anyone who would give her his love. She would accurately discern what kind of woman he desired and reconstruct herself accordingly, picking up strength, knowledge, education, open-mindedness, heartlessness, the status of a noble, and so much more, all for the sake of ensuring that she got together with the next target of her love.

Unfortunately, none of her relationships lasted long. The renowned warrior who wished for a strong woman rejoiced in her strength at the start, but eventually came to fear her for being in a realm so far beyond his reach and walked off on his own. In the case of the statesman, the leader of his neighboring country became so jealous of Estoria’s peerless beauty that he declared war, causing at least one entire clan to be executed on top of all the casualties from the war itself. By the time someone started calling her The Femme Fatale, she already stood above all other vampires.

“Ahhh, I feel so empty...”

A castle towered above a plain, and standing at the top of the castle was its owner, Estoria Kranweltz. The more she sought love, the higher she climbed, constantly starving. Now, she had an entire country under her. On her way there, her name had resounded throughout Abyssland, as did tales of the end of all the men who had given her their love. Those now surrounding her feared and were in awe of her, but none loved her. In turn, even she, who had a penchant for falling in love, could not bring herself to love someone who was not her match in power and station.

Eventually, she became obsessed with her search. She wanted someone with a heart generous enough to accept her, a prudent

person with a mature way of thinking. That meant someone middle-aged, old enough to have settled down somewhat. If he had the magnanimity to not care about trivial details, then she would even accept a fierce and aggressive person. However, such a perfect person couldn't—

“I've found him! My fated partner!”

The man Estoria had discovered was the head of a force that had started rising to prominence recently. He possessed the boldness to not fear anyone and the strength to merit being the leader of so many big-name demons. When Estoria came upon this man who matched her in power on the battlefield, her heart danced in ecstasy for the first time in a long time and she instantly fell in love with him.

After this came days of investigating, probing, and analyzing what kind of woman Gustav wanted. When Estoria was done, she sought him again in battle, pitting her vampires against his demons. The conclusion that she had arrived at was that Gustav sought a strong woman, one who could accompany him for the rest of his life on his path of conquest, a partner exemplary in both mind and body whom he could love with all he had. Estoria was fully convinced that she was the only woman in all Abyssland who could fulfill those conditions. So she decided to flaunt her power to him. Their two countries clashed repeatedly, meeting in direct battle again and again. Within the conflict, Estoria found joy and satisfaction. Gustav was properly looking at her, thinking about her, expressing his love for her. She was delighted beyond words.

Perhaps she had already gone crazy at this point from being starved for love so long. She was so desperate for love that her goal and methods failed to line up—of all things, she ended up forming an adversarial relationship with Gustav instead. And yet, she never doubted that she would eventually wed him, continuing to seek the joy of meeting him in battle. The world came to perceive them as bitter rivals struggling for supremacy, but that meant nothing to her. She was living in love, living in the moment. Sadly, however, this joy did not last long either.

“That can't be!”

Several months later, Estoria received word that Gustav had gotten married to some woman named Eliza. His country had held a large-scale celebration, proclaiming the union from the rooftops. Eliza had had a weak constitution ever since she was born and had trouble even getting up, but thanks to the devoted love and care of her childhood friend, Gustav, she was making inroads to recovery. Even now, she was recuperating inside Gustav's castle.

The article detailing everything was written in a way that was meant to warm the hearts of those who read it, but all it instilled in

Estoria's heart was despair. That was the moment she came to her senses. She realized that what she had been doing all along was the furthest thing from love. It was Estoria's first time failing to realize her love, and the emotion remained in her heart, faint but persistent. She could not really remember what happened after this. In all likelihood, she had continued going out to meet him in battle just to vent emotions that no longer had any means of release.

"Where...is this?"

When she came to, Estoria found herself in a white space. Before her eyes was a temple that looked like a mirage. A silver-haired saint and a warrior in white were looking at her.

"I shall grant you a new light."

Then, Estoria's eyes were opened to holy love. Despite being a vampire, she dedicated all of herself to that goddess and offered her worship. Everything she did, she now did for the sake of the one who had blessed her with more love than she could ever receive. One of her fellow Apostles really got on her nerves, but it never went beyond mere squabbling. Strangely, she could not find it in her to actually hate the other girl.

She still kept her interest in guys, but it was nowhere near as fanatical and all-important to her as before. Rather, now that she was aware of how she often brought misfortune to those in her life, she came to spurn long-term relationships. The best ones were the ones that lasted only a single night.

After coming to adopt this way of thinking, she started acting like a wanton prostitute who always had a ticket to her bed to hand out. All for the sake of becoming someone who could easily whisper love and cut ties just as easily.

Then, the goddess bestowed upon her the Uprising skill, and she became a being surpassing what she had been in her previous life. The large majority of Abyssland fell under her hand.

To bring the story back to the present, this was the woman who had just sent out a giant, created from a motley assortment of living beings. A dragon and a misshapen demon also hovered in the air, looking down at Ange.

"Let's get you back to Our Lady's side, Ange."



The giant threw the first punch. The momentum caused a few beings to be shaken free from its body, but they did not seem to mind. Instead, they turned their attention to Gerard.

After easily dodging the approaching fist, Ange said, ::It's so slow! But heads up, Gerard-san, quite a few of them went your way!::
::I am well aware!::

The knight had whittled down the number of vampire lords until there were only three left. Humans and monsters fell from the sky to take their places, but seeing as some failed to clinch the landing and groaned in pain, they were clearly not all well-trained fighters.

However, their strength lay in their numbers. Even now, more figures were appearing from Estoria's coffin and crowding around the giant, trying to climb on.

：“It's going to take me quite a while to kill these vampire lords while also paying attention to everything around me. Ange, how are things on—：”

Gerard looked up just in time to see his companion slipping past the giant to end the dragon and demon in the blink of an eye before charging directly at Estoria's barrier.

“Wait, wait, wait, you can't just ignore my Stampede Algos!”

“I'm an assassin, if you've forgotten! I go straight for the high-profile target!”

Despite Ange's words, however, the giant that Estoria had created—which she called Stampede Algos—was now wrapped up in chains tied to swords tagged with explosive talismans. As she passed by, Ange had thrown the chains at the monster and tangled it up. The swords now protruded at regular intervals across its massive body, stuck deep into an unlucky few and mercilessly rooted in place due to the multiple nasty barbs at their ends.

KA-BOOOOOOOOM!

And so began the explosions that followed the path of the chains, killing far more beings that made up Stampede Algos than were being added. With huge parts gouged out of it, the giant fell over.

Creator never told me about these weapons. So, she hasn't simply let love go to her head, Estoria thought as she lifted her white staff.

“Recovery Invo—”

“Too late.”

Before Estoria could finish casting her healing spell, Ange had already phased into Euthanasia. Even this barrier, which supposedly blocked all intrusion, meant nothing before Ange's Uncontainable.

“This coffin perfectly blocks out the outside, right?”

“That's ri— Huh?!”

Both of Ange's hands held the same barbed swords with explosive talismans as before. With godlike speed, she covered the inside of the coffin with several layers of them while throwing a few in Estoria's direction just often enough to keep her occupied.

“Do you plan on dying too, Assassin?” Estoria cried, desperately parrying the incoming attacks with Shion. She was capable of evading most physical attacks by turning parts of her body into bats and could heal herself in the blink of an eye even if she were poisoned.

However, not even those abilities could save her from an explosion over a large area. One bat dying hardly affected her, but *all* her bats dying at the same time was another story.

“Don’t worry, it won’t affect me, so you can enjoy the fun all by yourself! Aha!”

Ange produced two new blades and struck them against each other as if striking a match. The high-pitched clang that rang out served as a trigger that set off all the talismans inside the coffin. Explosions rocked every inch inside—even though the barrier was half-transparent, all that was visible when looking in from the outside were blinding flashes of red and orange.

An instant later, the barrier faded away. It had not been destroyed; Estoria had dispelled it. Immediately, the explosions and roiling flames spread out to consume the rest of the space in the top of the room along with all the remaining monsters. The cathedral was having a pretty bad day, what with being enveloped in ice, shaken by explosions, and seared by flames.

“Ugh...” Estoria fell out of the cloud of smoke and flames, her previously porcelain-white skin now marred with black soot and her black wings bearing severe burns. She was still alive, albeit barely, thanks to her healing magic.

“I’VE BEEN WAITING, HONEY!” a manly voice shouted at her approach. It was Gerard, charging forward while roaring fiercely. The vampire lords and riffraff that had been harrying him before all lay on the ground, dead. “Or should I say, sorry to keep you waiting? It did take me quite a bit of time handling everything back there. But thanks to that, I’m now in top form!”

Demon Sword Dainsleif had been powered up by cutting down the vampires, and Gerard himself was being buffed by Glory Within Mine Hands. The Sword Guru was in perfect condition, standing ready with his greatsword clad in a howling whirlwind of magic and waiting for the perfect moment to strike with all the power he could muster.

“Oh no, darling, don’t get my hopes up. I’m the type to become pretty devoted when I get serious, I’ll have you know. But I admit, I didn’t exactly expect this...” For some reason, Estoria’s cheeks were blushing. However, she still had her staff held out.

“Salvation Ray!”

“Skyfall!”

Light rays bringing destruction fell far and wide, yet Gerard stood tall and proud, sending the whirlwind of magic gathered along the length of his blade flying with one mighty swing. The pitch-black slash called Skyfall swallowed all the light in its path, drawing even more strength in the process.



That is definitely going to reach me. Quickly discerning the danger that she was in, Estoria braced herself to turn into bats at just the right time. Just then, however, she felt a sudden pain in her back that messed up her timing. Before she knew it, that pain had pierced her heart. When she looked down, she found the source of her agony protruding from the left side of her chest—a sharp blade made of silver, one of the things vampires were vulnerable to.

“Assassiiiiin!”

“*Cough, cough.* You’re still not dead?”

Ange leaped down from the flames above, coughing. She had thrown the silver sword at Estoria while remaining hidden within the roiling orange mass. Due to having stayed inside longer than the duration of her Unique Skill allowed, she had been unable to get out unscathed. However, thanks to the explosions serving as cover, her use of Covert Action, and Gerard drawing away Estoria’s attention, she had managed to land one good, solid attack on her opponent.

“Now then, let’s have an endurance contest, shall we?” Gerard said before disappearing into the barrage of Salvation Ray. As he had just finished swinging his sword, he had no time to properly duck underneath his shield. However, his words carried a strength that belied his circumstances. And on Estoria’s side, she now had to deal with the present Gerard had left behind: Skyfall.

Oh no...he really is so wonderful!

In turn, Estoria disappeared into the darkness. Skyfall swallowed up Salvation Ray, Estoria, and all the flames still in the air, piercing the ceiling of the cathedral and burrowing deep into the hole it had cleft. The sound of something crumbling echoed back down.

::Where’s Estoria?: Gerard looked around warily. He could not see even an arm of hers remaining, but that was no excuse to be careless. She had proven herself resilient enough to survive being beheaded and stabbed in the heart, after all.

Rightfully wary of their opponent’s vitality, Ange used her detection skills to scour their surroundings.

“*Squeak...*”

“THERE!”

Three bats that were likely parts of Estoria were all flying towards the giant that was now on its knees, approaching from three separate directions. Ange ignored her body’s screams of protest to charge forward for one last hunt. Unfortunately, just as she finished off her second bat, the third one reached its goal.

“Urgh!” Ange grunted in frustration.

Estoria laughed weakly, breathing heavily. “Close...but no dice, Assassin.” She had returned to her original form but was in an

absolutely deplorable state. Half her body was gone, and what was left was covered in blood. However, she was now gathering her blood back from Stampede Algos—what she had once given out, she was taking back with interest. All of the living beings that made up the giant suddenly shrank and shriveled up, reverting to mere skin and bones at a visible rate. In exchange, a large amount of blood gathered above the palm of the single hand Estoria had left.

“As long as a single one of my bats remains, I can stay alive. I might not be Survivor’s equal in this regard, but I’m pretty confident in my survivability too. And with this blood that I’ve collected—”

“You’d make a full recovery?”

Rion suddenly appeared in front of Estoria. She’d had Covert Action activated for a while now, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. In a split second, all the blood that Estoria had gathered and her one remaining arm were reduced to dust by a flash of electricity. To follow up, Rion then blasted her surroundings with Absolute Purification.



“Are you okay, An-nee?”

“Mm, I’m fine. My throat’s a bit singed, but I’ll have Kelvin heal it for me.”

Ange accepted the hand that Rion offered and stood up. Since the protection from the ice briars was gone, the ground now bore deep and treacherous holes from the spell cast by Estoria. The chamber was almost entirely buried in rubble, with nowhere stable to stand on top of.

Just then, one large piece of rubble shifted and was pushed aside. “Phew! Ugh, owww... Ah, I finally got out!”

Gerard emerged from the hole, all beaten up. He had used up every last drop of magic he had, and his armor was bent and broken in several places, but he still had a lot more energy than his appearance suggested.

“Hi, Gramps! Good work to you too. You okay there?”

“Ohhh, if it isn’t Rion! I’m fine...but not entirely fine! Can I have you ride on my shoulders?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not something to do to an injured person,” Rion replied, pulling a wry face while clambering onto the shoulders of the old knight, who was now radiating happiness. “I’m sorry. I wanted to help out earlier, but...”

Ange waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. It’s thanks to you we managed to finish this fight.”

Rion took a better look around the room. All the enemies in the air had been burned and blasted to death by Ange’s explosions, all the

beings that had made up Stampede Algos had been wiped out when Estoria had stolen their blood earlier, and all the enemies on the ground had been taken care of thanks to Gerard's efforts. Estoria herself had also been rendered entirely powerless. Ange and Gerard had suffered injuries that were going to need proper attention, but the battle was unmistakably their win.

"That's right," Gerard agreed, nodding. "At the end of the day, Rion really is wonderful."

"Um...how so?" Rion tilted her head quizzically.

"In grandchild power." Gerard's face was entirely serious, though it could not be seen behind his helmet. Since he'd had his fill of skinship with his grandchild, he now carefully placed Rion back down on the ground.

A hoarse voice barely louder than a whisper spoke up.

"That...wasn't fair. To think...there was someone...else...hiding..."

The speaker was, of course, Estoria Kranweltz. Any other vampire hit with Rion's Absolute Purification at point-blank range would have instantly turned to ash. There was no sign of this happening to Estoria, however, perhaps because she worshipped a goddess, or perhaps because she had received a blessing from one. Either way, she was extremely weakened but alive. It would have been easy to finish her off, but depending on one's perspective, she could prove to be a valuable source of information. After all, she was privy to what had happened among the Apostles after Ange had left.

After a discussion, it was decided that she would be left alive until Kelvin arrived to pronounce judgment. He had already been informed through the Network and would be reaching them soon.

That said, for all they knew, this queen of vampires perhaps still had a way to heal herself. Therefore, the group stabbed her thrice with Lethal Opiate Sword to steal three of her senses—up to her sight—and a clone of Clotho swallowed her up and used Metalicize to turn into the most powerful metal it knew, continuously draining her MP. Consequently, Estoria's MP was continually emptied out, rendering it impossible for her to cast spells. Her having 0 MP for an extended length of time likely also gave her some sort of debuff, but just to be triply sure, Rion called Alex out of her shadow and had him use his own shadows to tie up the Clotho clone.

Lastly, the group took away Shion and confiscated the Storage pouch hidden in Estoria's cleavage. Rion got curious about what was inside, but the moment she peeked in, the contents started purifying at an alarming rate, so she gave up. In all likelihood, they were merely articles belonging to deceased beings that Estoria planned on reviving and a large number of monster corpses.

"All of you...are too lenient... You really should...kill me

now...when you have...the chance..."

"That's Kelvin's call to make. We're just gonna stay put and hold our position until then."

"Well, I suppose this, too, is some form of fate. What do you say to some small talk?" Gerard lumbered over and sat down next to where Estoria lay on the ground, prompting a barely audible gasp from her.

Ange caught it and turned her way. "Huh? Hold on, Reviver. Why's your face red?"

"I-It's nothing. My burn wounds...just feel hot...that's all..."

Estoria tried to look away, but because she was entirely immobilized, all she ended up moving was her gaze. However, that ended up with her looking directly at Gerard's face. She was supposed to have lost her vision, but she got as flustered as if she could see. Perhaps she was sensing something beyond what could be viewed with the eyes.

An awkward atmosphere fell until Gerard, who actually could see, could not stand it any longer.

"Ah, that's right! What's happened to Princess?! I need to back her up!" He got up and whirled towards the wall of ice Melfina had erected.

"Mel-san already finished up a while ago," Ange replied, giving him a teasing look that stopped him in his tracks. "She defeated the lich king. Didn't you see the message in the log? She's now focusing on healing Sister Atra."

"Has spring finally come for you, Gramps?" Rion laughed. "Looks like Prettia-chan has a new rival."

"Don't misunderstand, Rion!" Gerard protested. "As I keep saying, I'm only dedicated to my wife—"

Ange sighed. "It's already a complicated enough love triangle. I know I'm hardly the right person to say this, but Reviver, you fall in love way too easily."

"Oh, shush..." Estoria replied, sounding embarrassed.

Before they knew it, the group was having fun just shooting the breeze. Although Estoria had forgotten what real romantic love was for the longest time, just a little bit of what had been suppressed in her heart had come back out. Whether that was a good thing or not was a different matter entirely, of course—if that part of her that had been mitigated by holy love was to be put into words, "manic love" would probably be most suitable.

Crack.

Suddenly, cracks started running through the wall that split the room, filling the air with the sound of splintering ice. Eventually, the tightly packed barrier of briars broke apart into chunks and came crashing down.

Gerard looked over. "Oh? Princess's triumphant return."

"Saved by the bell, eh, Gerard?" Ange chuckled.

"Like I said, that's not it!"

"Mel-neeeee," Rion called out playfully.

However, no answer came from beyond the crumbling wall of ice.

"Huh? Did she not hear me? I'll use telepathy." Rion tried to reach out to Melfina once again. "That's...strange. She's not replying to me."

"Really? I feel her on the other side, though." Ange directed her senses to the other side of the wall. As expected, the only presences she picked up were Melfina and Atra. And—

"What?!"

Nope, there was a third one.

"What happened, An-nee?"

"Everyone, prepare for battle! NOW! Argh, why?! How did this happen?!"

Ange sounded uncharacteristically flustered. Understanding that something serious had happened, Rion and Gerard promptly drew their weapons, and Alex bared his fangs.

Ange uploaded the detailed profile of the Apostle of the Fourth Seat onto the Network before calling out, "Why are you here, Protector?!"

When the wall fully fell away, it revealed Melfina on her knees, covered in wounds from head to toe, and a young girl sitting at the edge of the altar, smiling cheerfully. Next to her lay the nun Melfina was supposed to have saved, still lying on her back.

Protector, whose real identity was Serge Flore, the ancient Hero who had defeated Demon Lord Gustav, wore a pure white outfit and had a sweet face framed by black hair. The sword at her waist indicated that she was a swordswoman, but it was no normal sword. In fact, Rion had seen it before, and very recently, at that. Specifically, it looked extremely similar to the Holy Sword that one of the current Heroes, Kanzaki Touya, carried. Touya's was more of a greatsword and Serge's veered on being a slender longsword, but everything else, including the ornamentation and quality of the magic flowing through it, greatly resembled Holy Sword Will. The likeness was all the more obvious to Rion, who had fought against it recently.

Another detail that immediately caught the group's attention was the strange shapes made of ice in the room. What looked like fierce fangs of ice covered the floor in a way that looked like they were running towards the altar where Serge sat but then suddenly veered off when they got close. Due to this, the area in a three-meter radius around the altar was entirely flat but framed by a giant bristling crevasse. The wall behind Serge also bore the scar of a dreadful attack.

"C'mon, that's a pretty cold thing to say, Assassin. I decided to

drop by after finishing a mission!”

Side Story: The Saint's Elegant Day Off

Colette Deramilius, the Oracle of Deramis and saint of the Holy Order of Rinne, woke up early in the mornings. This was partly out of necessity, as her schedule had become even more packed now that she had to liaise with various neighboring countries after Kelvin's group had defeated the Demon Lord in Trycen. On top of this, she never missed a single prayer session; whenever it was time, she simply had to drop everything and dedicate the time to lift fervent prayers to Goddess Melfina.

In light of all this, she basically had no other choice but to sacrifice her own sleeping time. However, Captain Cliff and others around her worried that she would eventually fall ill if she continued to push herself this hard.

"Oracle, please take a rest sometime. For just one day, at least."

"There's no need to worry so much about me. I'm completely fine. In fact, I'm the one who's actively seeking ways to be of more use to Melfina-sama!"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. Just how many days have you been working nonstop? Even if you feel motivated, there are times when your body can't keep up. Cardinal Sai has brought a notice from His Holiness ordering you to rest. You can't go against a direct order, can you?"

"The pope did what? Goodness, father's doing unnecessary things again..."

And so, it was decided that today, Colette would be taking a day off for the first time in weeks. A day with nothing whatsoever planned. However, just as many people wake up at the same time even on their days off, habits ingrained in a person are not so easily forgotten. The same was true of Colette. At the usual hour, her eyes blinked open.

"It's...morning. Nnnnn!"

She sat up in bed and raised both arms in a big stretch. This was not a particularly strange thing to do when waking up, but it was at least a rare sight for the believers who only ever got to see her when she was acting as a saint. If this scene was ever to be put to pen and paper, it would surely be priceless in value.



“What a refreshing morning it is. I feel like it’s going to be a wonderful day.”

Despite Colette’s comment, however, the weather outside her window was actually quite cloudy. Normally, the words “refreshing morning” would not apply to such circumstances, but Colette felt it so from the bottom of her heart.

She giggled. “When I think about how Melfina-sama is somewhere else under that sky, it doesn’t matter how many clouds there are, it looks like the brightest summer blue to me.”

The girl threw open her windows and started taking deep breaths. The simple thought that her beloved goddess walked the same earth as her—no matter how far away she was—was enough to bring the most fragrant aroma to her nose, giving her enough energy to not only get through the day, but even work for twenty-four hours straight. That was the secret behind how she was able to remain energetic no matter where she was or how swamped she was with work.

The target of her worship, however, had no idea she was being used in such a way, occupied as she was with eating, walking and eating, and sightseeing and eating. Then again, it wasn’t as if anyone was being bothered by it, so everything was fine. This was just Colette satisfying herself, which was not a problem.

“All right, I’m fully recharged now. Judging by all the scents around her, Melfina-sama must have gorged herself on meat yesterday, as always. Personally, I think she should eat a few more vegetables too. No, no, it’s best for Melfina-sama to eat whatever she wants. A lowly servant such as myself should not be giving my unsolicited opinion. I need to be more self-aware of my role as her Oracle!”

Even though she did possess Olfaction Rank S, it was impossible for Colette to actually pick up on the scent of someone far away in another country. Or at least, it was supposed to be impossible, but her weirdly specific description could actually convince someone that she was indeed intimately aware of Melfina’s current habits. In spite of everything, she was still an Oracle—no, rather, it should be said that it was precisely *because* she was an Oracle that she could make the impossible possible.

“Now then, I’m completely refreshed, but since His Holiness ordered it, I need to properly enjoy this day off as best I can. The current time... There is still a while before breakfast. What shall I do?”

Colette got out of her sleepwear and into a more casual vestment than her usual garments while thinking about how to pass the time after being ordered to take the day off. One could spend hours asking what a casual vestment was, but it was the pope himself who had

called it that, so there was no room to contest it.

“Something I can only do on a day off... Something I can only do on a day off... Truly, what am I supposed to do?”

As someone who rolled her pastime, *raison d'être*, personal gain, and work all into one, Colette had trouble imagining what a day off meant for her. She understood the meaning of the term and its necessity in the general sense. However, when she tried to apply that definition to herself, she had trouble seeing how it helped her. She already lived every day doing what she loved, and she simply had to focus and take a deep breath to recharge herself.

Most importantly, all the work she was involved in was related to Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation, and so she derived great pleasure from even the smallest tasks. In fact, being forbidden to apply herself to such undertakings on this so-called “day off” was making her restless and causing her stress.

“Not doing anything would be a waste of time. Oh, that’s right! How about I make some personal arrangements for welcoming Melfina-sama and Kelvin-sama when they come to visit Deramis! That is a wonderful idea, if I do say so myself. And because it is for a personal welcoming, it doesn’t count as work! It’s entirely unrelated!”

Colette spoke aloud as if to convince herself of her logic, then danced around a bit. Still dancing, she made her way over to the desk. On top of the desk were neat rows of test tubes filled with a wide variety of colorful medicines. This was the medicine-compounding space that she had set up in the manner of alchemists. Technically, it could be considered her new hobby, but she did not think of it that way.

“I’m still inexperienced with this, but as they say, the most important thing when doing something is to put your heart into it. Let me see. The first thing I should do as preparation for my personal welcome is make holy water to bless the two of them. And since this is a private matter, my room should suffice for the ceremony. Yes, that should do just fine. Heh heh heh heh...”

Although she called herself inexperienced, her hands moved deftly as she began the compounding process. Taking a bit from the tubes here and there, she sequentially crushed, mixed, and dissolved all the ingredients needed for her original blend of holy water. Throughout the process, she had a saintly smile on her face, probably imagining the moment she would be using the concoction.

“Since this is for two transcendental beings, I should make it more concentrated. I think twice would—no, five times as much as usual should do the trick. It’s important to give everything a try!”

Breathing heavily in excitement, she picked up a bottle filled with a suspicious pink liquid and poured it into the mixture with no

hesitation whatsoever. Surprisingly, when the two liquids blended together, she was left with an end product that was transparent, looking like normal water in every way. And in spite of everything she had put into it, the solution was also completely odorless.

“I think...I can go further.”

In the end, Colette dedicated the entire day to this task, forgetting to eat and drink. Cliff and everyone else who had been worried about her thought her fatigue had caught up with her and she was spending the day sleeping, so they, out of consideration, made arrangements for no one to enter her room. Subsequently, Colette managed to complete her one-of-a-kind holy water recipe without anyone interrupting her. Where she would be using it was a story for another day.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 8: The Pope of the Holy Empire*. It's Doufu Mayoi here, the author who's getting increasingly exhausted as we near the end of the year. Thank you so much to all the readers who are still following this series as it moves from web novel to printed pages. Your purchase means the world to me.

Did you see how saintly Colette looks in the illustration on the cover of this volume? Then, as soon as you cracked open the book, you immediately got to see her again in color, this time being her usual self in the first insert illustration. That's double the blessing, getting to see her with such different expressions. I personally love her, so I'm more than happy with all the attention she got here. I hope you look forward to her antics in the future! I even snuck in some foreshadowing during the short story at the end, so rest assured, there's a lot in store for her.

But wow, we've finally reached the halfway mark for this series. All the enemies that Kelvin's group will meet going forward are going to be overwhelmingly powerful, so I suppose I can't just waste my time being obsessed with Colette. The web novel version is entering the very last arc, with the words "The End" just waiting to appear on screen. My keyboard will roar as I rev into high gear and dive straight into writing the ending!

Oh, right. The manga serialization that began this year is also going swimmingly. It's still coming out, with the second volume going on sale the same day as this volume of the light novel. It portrays a part of Viktor that I wasn't able to write about as well as his incredibly flashy battle with Kelvin. If you are even a little interested, I highly recommend that you check it out.

Lastly, in regards to the actual production of this volume of *Black Summoner*, I want to express my thanks to Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama for drawing Colette so cutely, my proofreaders, and of course, once more, all my dear readers.

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN CELSIUS

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / DAEMON/ SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 132

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 2,168/2,168

■ MP: 20,400/20,400 (+13,600)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 1,000

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY):

MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -320

SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP -?

■ STRENGTH: 1,289 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,210 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 1,532

■ MAGIC: 3,063 (+640)

■ LUCK: 2,011

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK STAFF OF DISASTER (RANK S) MAD HOLY SWORD CLIVE (RANK S)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) SKILL EATER (RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S) BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S) TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS OF

THE DIVINE BEAST (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC OVERCLOCK (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

EXPERIENCE SHARING

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

SUMMONING (RANK S)

[AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2]

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MIND'S EYE (RANK A)

DISGUISE (RANK A)

SMITHING (RANK S)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/ ABSOLUTE PURIFICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SHUTOLA TRYCEN

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / PUPPETMASTER

■ LEVEL: 105

■ TITLE: PUPPET TACTICIAN

■ HP: 444/444

■ MP: 660/660

■ STRENGTH: 217

■ ENDURANCE: 225

■ AGILITY: 543

■ MAGIC: 1,079 (+320)

■ LUCK: 651

■ EQUIPMENT

GODDESS'S MAGI-THREADS (RANK S)

TEDDY BEAR (RANK B)

GEORGIUS (RANK S)

GUARD (RANK A) X 25

FAIRY DRESS II (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE II (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

HIGH-CLASS SHOES (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

PERFECT MEMORY (UNIQUE SKILL)

PUPPETRY (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK D)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK B)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK A)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK B)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK B)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK A)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ KANZAKI TOUYA

- 18 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN / SWORD SAINT
- LEVEL: 79
- TITLE: OTHERWORLD HERO
- HP: 1,136/1,136
- MP: 652/652

- STRENGTH: 401
- ENDURANCE: 384
- AGILITY: 407
- MAGIC: 404
- LUCK: 644 (+160)

■ EQUIPMENT

HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK S)
LUMINESCENT GAUNTLETS (RANK A)
LUMINESCENT ARMOR (RANK A)
LUMINESCENT CROWN (RANK A)
PROTECTIVE PENDANT (RANK A)
LUMINESCENT GREAVES (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

ABSOLUTE GOSPEL (UNIQUE SKILL)
SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)
DUAL WIELD (RANK S)
WHITE MAGIC (RANK A)
ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)
SUPER LUCK (RANK B)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE SPIRIT OF LIGHT
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SHIGA SETSUNA

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SAMURAI

■ LEVEL: 79

■ TITLE: OTHERWORLD HERO

■ HP: 729 / 729

■ MP: 486 / 486

■ STRENGTH: 555

■ ENDURANCE: 333

■ AGILITY: 1,274 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 229

■ LUCK: 325

■ EQUIPMENT

HIMETSURU (RANK A)

TEMPEST GAUNTLETS (RANK A)

TEMPEST LIGHT ARMOR (RANK A)

PROTECTIVE PENDANT (RANK A)

TEMPEST GREAVES (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

IRON CUTTING AUTHORITY (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK A)

SKY WALK (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

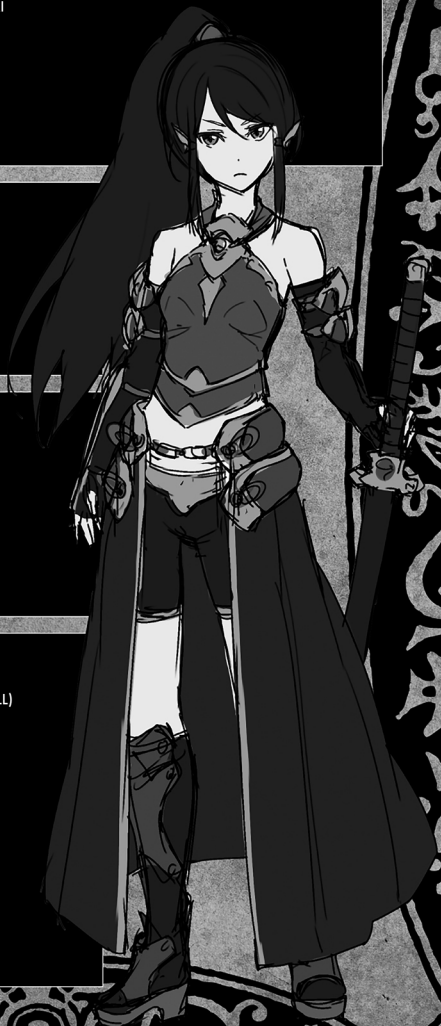
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE SPIRIT OF WIND

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MIZUOKA NANA

- 18 Y / 18 Y / O / FEMALE / HUMAN / TAMER
- LEVEL: 78
- TITLE: OTHERWORLD HERO
- HP: 486 / 486
- MP: 962 / 962

- STRENGTH: 226
- ENDURANCE: 868 (+320)
- AGILITY: 148
- MAGIC: 572
- LUCK: 307

■ EQUIPMENT

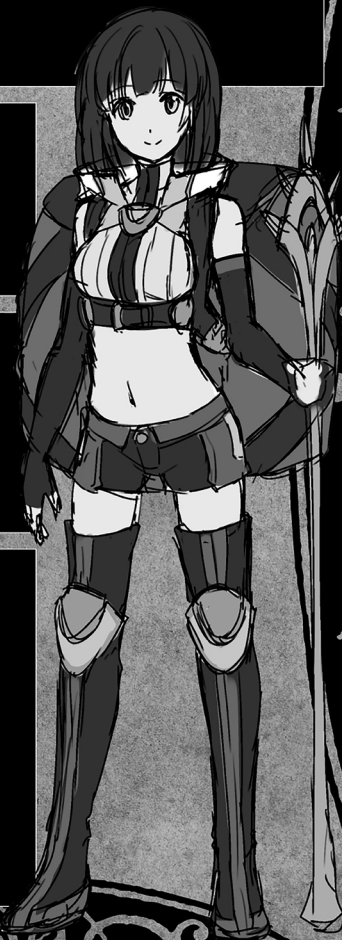
STAFF OF BOUNTIFUL HARVEST (RANK A)
OUTFIT OF FRIENDSHIP (RANK A)
SUITE RUCKSACK (RANK S)
PROTECTIVE PENDANT (RANK A)
CAMELLIA BOOTS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

ANIMAL COMMUNICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)
BLUE MAGIC (RANK A)
WHITE MAGIC (RANK A)
TAMING (RANK A)
COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)
IRON WALL (RANK A)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE SPIRIT OF WATER
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ KUROMIYA MIYABI

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / BLACK MAGE

■ LEVEL: 79

■ TITLE: OTHERWORLD HERO

■ HP: 405 / 405

■ MP: 1,221 / 1,221

■ STRENGTH: 150

■ ENDURANCE: 317

■ AGILITY: 304

■ MAGIC: 1,043 (+320)

■ LUCK: 229

■ EQUIPMENT

SILVER MOON (RANK A)

ARBENT ROBE (RANK A)

ASTEL HAT (RANK A)

PROTECTIVE PENDANT (RANK A)

NOX BOOTS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)

MAGIC CONVERSATION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK B)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK A)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE SPIRIT OF DARKNESS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ ESTORIA KLANWELTZ

■ 617 Y/O / FEMALE / PURE VAMPIRE / PRIESTESS

■ LEVEL: 158

■ TITLE: REVIVER

■ HP: 4,666 / 4,666

■ MP: 16,146 / 16,146 (+10,764)

■ STRENGTH: 2,080

■ ENDURANCE: 1,824

■ AGILITY: 1,267

■ MAGIC: 3,647 (+640)

■ LUCK: 798

■ EQUIPMENTS

SHION (RANK S)

APPRENTICE NUN HABIT (RANK D)

APPRENTICE NUN VEIL (RANK D)

FASHION GLASSES (RANK E)

DEATH BONE POUCH (RANK S)

LEATHER BOOTS (RANK D)

■ SKILLS

CHARM EYE (UNIQUE SKILL)

UPRISING (UNIQUE SKILL)

STAFF MASTERY (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK A)

BLOODSUCKING (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)

ACTING (RANK S)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

GREATER LIGHT ELEMENTAL RESISTANCE

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK S)

CONVERSATION (RANK S)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

BAT TRANSFORMATION

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS



Bonus Short Stories

Sera's Idea for Surviving the Heat Wave

Parth was being assaulted by a heat wave the likes of which it had never seen before. The sun was blazing hotter than a blacksmith's furnace, causing anyone who took a single step outside to immediately break out in a sweat. It was so bad that people whispered the baseless rumor that the Fire Dragon King had sneezed and his sneeze had come to cover the Eastern Continent.

The Celsius residence, where the Rank S adventurer Grim Reaper and his companions lived, was no exception.

"It's so hoooooot. Kelvin, do something about it..."

"Rion and Shutola are making do by playing in the fountain, so I don't want to hear you, a full-grown adult, complaining."

Kelvin and Sera were currently lounging about in the living room. No matter how good they were at fighting, they were still as susceptible to the elements as anyone else. When inside a dungeon or on the road, their heads would switch to the appropriate frame of mind and they wouldn't let out a peep. However, today was a day off, a day to recover from both their physical and mental fatigue. At this rate, neither was going to get better, which was why Sera had been whining this entire time.

"Then let's go to the beach at Toraj. We can change into swimwear and cool down in the water."

"Just because you're an adult doesn't mean you can suddenly scale things up to eleven, all right?"

"Oh my gosh, Kelvin, is there no pleasing you? And Mel's gone out on another of her eating strolls today, of all days, so she's not here to cool the room down! Ughhhhh!"

"How about you join the girls in the fountain? You have a swimsuit, right? Then you don't have to worry about getting wet."

"Ughhh...I can't be bothered to get up, much less get changed."

"There's a lot I want to say to that, but...yeah, I can't find it in me either."

The two who were lying spread-eagle on the ground apparently did not have even the energy to sit up. However, the heat did not let up, and their sweat continued to flow. If they did not eventually move, they would get dehydrated.

"Oh, I have an idea!" Sera, who had turned on her side, clapped

her hands together to indicate she'd had a flash of inspiration.

Still looking up at the ceiling and not bothering to look her way, Kelvin asked, "Which is?"

"My genius self has come upon a brilliant way to comfortably get through this terrible heat wave! Clotho, become my bed!"

"What?" Confusion filled Kelvin's listless eyes.

Paying him no attention, Sera took out the tiny Clotho clone on her person and spoke to it. The slime pounded its chest—body?—once, then quickly began to expand. What used to be small enough to sit on Sera's finger quickly became the size of a normal bed.

"I knew I could count on you, Clotho! This is perfect! Hup!"

"What are y—"

With an alacrity that belied the listlessness she had displayed so far, Sera got up and immediately dove into the bed that was Clotho's body. She had tackled it at a rather impressive speed, but the slime managed to absorb the impact by jiggling its body for a while. Sera had her face buried in Clotho the entire time, lying still save for the single comment, "So this is where my summer resort is..."

"It's that incredible?!" The sheer contentment radiating from Sera made Kelvin extremely curious about the Clotho bed. A while later, the children returned to find these two blissfully napping side by side. The Clotho bed became a huge fad in the Celsius household for a while after that.

Prettia-sensei's Love Lecture

In a corner inside a small, fancy café somewhere on the Eastern Continent, a group of girls with incredible presence were gathered around a small table. This included Efil, Sera, Melfina, Rion, and even Ange—in short, pretty much the full roster of the beauties of the Celsius household. However, someone even more attention-grabbing than all of these jaw-dropping stunners was sitting with them. In fact, the other visitors at the store—and everyone walking in—had their eyes fixated on this particular individual. Efil and the others at the table were also similarly giving her their undivided attention.

"And that's when I said, 'I'm ending this love here. The place you belong is beside your childhood friend!'"

Of course, this was the Rank S adventurer that was close to all the female members of the Celsius household, "Peach Ogre" Goldiana Prettiana. Today was the third iteration of the love lecture she hosted, and she had just finished giving an account of her passionate yet bittersweet stories of romance.

"So mature!" Rion exclaimed. "You backed off on your own!"

"So that's what happened," Sera marveled. "I expected no less of

you. How profound!”

Efil had a conflicted look on her face. “Master is the only person for me, so I can’t imagine having to make such a choice.”

“Wha— It’s the same for me too! I won’t lose even to you in my love for Kelvin, Efil-chan!” Ange protested.

“I can only imagine how much it hurt you to make that call,” Melfina murmured before turning around and calling, “Excuse me! Please bring us ten more plates of this Special Pudding!”

While listening to each girl’s response to her story, the woman with plenty of experience turned her thoughts to the state of each of their love lives.

“Well, that’s enough about me. I want to hear what you sweet darlings are up to. Now, I’m just guessing, but Efil-chan and Sera-chan, things are going just swimmingly for you two, right? Efil-chan’s always been clear on her path, and Sera-chan seems to have lost all her hesitation after she crossed that one line. Was it possibly due to my advice? Ha ha.”

Ange asked, “Advice?” at the same time Rion asked, “What line?”

“Nothing! It’s nothing!” Sera cried, leaping to her feet and shaking both hands vigorously.

The sight prompted a gentle smile on Goldiana’s face. “As for Rion-chan, I suppose you have family circumstances to consider. Personally speaking, I’d love to cheer you on, but I’m sure I... No, maidens in love are the ultimate treasures of the world. As an evangelist of love, there’s no way I can ever reject one! But that said, it doesn’t seem like you’re having all that much trouble, Rion-chan. In a way, you’ve already broken through the wall with him.”

“Aww, shucks, thank you.”

“That leaves Ange-chan. Mm! Mm, mm! I’m an absolute fan of love as pure as yours!” Goldiana patted Ange’s shoulders a few times and gave her an understanding gaze.

“Huh?! What did you figure out about me from what I just said?!” Ange cried, her face as red as a tomato. “Oh right! Mel-san! What about Mel-san, then?! You still haven’t given your impression of her!”

“*Om nom nom...gulp*. What was that about me?” Melfina, who was building a tower of plates as usual, looked up with cream all around her mouth.

“Mel-chan is... Oh dear, what is... I’m sorry, but I can’t seem to get a full reading on her. I’ve never felt this beating in my chest before. It’s like, you’re free but also tied to a profoundly strong will of sorts. Dear oh dear, I dare say I’ve never encountered anything like it.”

Goldiana tilted her large head, looking puzzled. Contrasting her previous replies, she now sounded vague and unsure.

Melfina grinned. “Looks like even someone with as much

experience as Goldiana can't fully read me. Which is only natural, of course, since I'm the legal wife!"

"I admit to being quite stumped, but I'm sure that having such powerful feelings is a good thing. See, it also serves as stimulation to those around you."

Fires blazed in the eyes of the girls, silent yet ferocious, as their competitive spirits flared up. The person they had identified as their rival, Melfina, turned around to put in another order of pudding.

Kelvin's Manly Meal

There was no doubt in Kelvin's mind that Efil's cooking was the most delicious in the entire world, unmatched by anything else. That assessment was entirely unaffected by whether they were at home or outdoors and whether she was standing in a proper kitchen or not. Every single ingredient she handled would turn into the most delectable dish. Her cooking proficiency was such that one could almost be convinced she would be able to pick up a random chip of wood lying by the roadside and make it delicious—and she might just be able to meet those expectations.

Naturally, Kelvin hadn't a single complaint about her food, and he devoured it every day with as much satisfaction as Melfina did. However, even he got a certain itch once in a while.

"I kinda feel like eating a rough, hearty meal for guys."

The words just suddenly came out of his mouth, largely unbidden. Kelvin didn't think much of them, and there had been very little actual intention in his mind. His feelings were quite understandable. Even someone who knew nothing about cooking would get such urges sometimes. His timing, however, was a bit unfortunate.

CRAAAASH!

Of all times, he actually said it when Efil was within earshot. The sound of plates crashing to the ground resounded loudly throughout the room.

"Efil?! Are you okay?!"

"Master! Was there something not to your liking in the meal just now?! Please tell me! I promise I'll do better next time! Please!"

"What? Oh, no, that's not what I meant..."

"Honey, you're going to have to resolve that misunderstanding now."

Efil's uncharacteristic episode required a lot of effort on Kelvin's part to calm her down and properly convey what he was thinking. Only then could he breathe a sigh of relief after his one thoughtless comment.

Once Efil finally understood what Kelvin meant, he brought Sera

and Dahak, who looked like they wanted some attention, to a forest somewhere. The pretext was that they were going for a hike, whereas they were actually planning on making a big, hearty, *manly* meal.

“So, here’s the meat.” Kelvin threw a monster as large as a cow down on the ground, causing a dull thud.

“You sure are quick to make a move, brother,” Dahak marveled.

Kelvin shot him a look. “Can you not put it in a way that sounds so misleading?”

“I don’t think it’s misleading at all, though,” Sera quipped. “What’re you making?”

“Since we’re here and all, there’s only one choice, right? Gotta go simple and hearty: we’re having meat on the spit!”

“Whoa, you’re gonna roast the entire thing?!”

“That’s right, Dahak! I’ve always wanted to try it!”

Kelvin dressed the carcass with quick, broad strokes, turning it into a lump of meat so large he could barely hold it in his arms. He pierced it with an iron stake, then set it into position above a hearty fire. And that was it for the preparations. The only thing left to do was rotate the spit so the meat would be evenly cooked on all sides.

“What’re you gonna do for the seasoning?” Sera asked.

Kelvin grinned. “I brought salt and pepper. We’ll sprinkle it on when serving!”

“You’re really staying faithful to being rough, I see.”

Thirty minutes of idle chatting later, the air was filled with the fragrant aroma of cooked meat.

Kelvin peered at the spit. “You think it’s about done?”

Sera shrugged. “You tell me.”

“What’s with that face? If you have something to say, then say it.”

“Oh, no, I have nothing to say. But go on, since you cooked it, you should have the honor of trying it first.”

“That’s a good point! Brother, dig right in!”

“Ooookay. Well, as this is a rough, hearty meal for a true man, I’m biting directly into it! Here goes!”

Kelvin sprinkled salt and pepper generously over his portion, then enthusiastically chomped down.

Seeing him fall silent, Sera asked, “Well?”

“Uh...it’s still raw on the inside.”

“Pffft. I figured. Your cooking time was way too short considering how big you cut the meat.”

“You knew it’d turn out this way, Sera?!”

“I had a hunch. So, what do you want to do? You want to keep cooking? Or let me take over? It’s true that cooking an entire beast over an open fire is hearty, but I remember Efil saying before that it’s actually pretty difficult.”

“Please and thank you.”

Kelvin’s decision was instantaneous. That decisiveness was, in a way, manly too. And so he passed the baton to Sera, who started roasting it with careful attention.

“Um, brother, meat isn’t really my thing, so I’m gonna go off to look for some wild vegetables and berries.”

“Uh...could it be that among the three of us, Sera’s actually the manliest?”

“What are you even talking about?”

Firsthand Account of the Celsius Household

I am Lala, a member of the public relations section of the intelligence bureau of the Adventurer’s Guild. Today, I have come to the house of Kelvin Celsius, the most recently promoted Rank S adventurer, in order to interview him. We released a new edition of the Adventurer Directory not long ago, but Kelvin has already racked up a huge number of exploits since, not the least of which included his showing at the Beast King Festival. In a departure from other Rank S adventurers, his companions were all nearly as powerful as he was, and for better or worse, he is a man of countless hard-to-believe rumors. It was my duty today to confirm the veracity of as many facts as I could. I was directly ordered to do so by the Guildmaster General!

The responsibility is enormous! Okay, I’m gonna give it my all!

“Please wait here awhile. Master will be along shortly.”

“Oh, uh, thank you! Please don’t go out of your way for me!”

Despite the pep talk I gave myself, however, I was extremely nervous due to Kelvin’s house basically being a fancy mansion! He had scary-looking door guards, soldiers patrolling the halls, and some sort of barrier cast on his walls. As I had had my fair share of time out in the field as an adventurer and could use some magic, I could tell how insane everything here was. The place probably had better defensive capabilities than some castles.

Uh oh. I’ve yet to meet Kelvin and my heart’s already going cuckoo. And okay, looks like my vocabulary’s gone out the window! No, wait, there’s something more important to do right now!

“Um...are you perhaps, uh, ‘Bombing Princess’ Efil-san?”

“Ah, yes. I am Efil.”

“So you are... Aha ha...”

So the line about her being a maid in the Directory really is true! Everyone in the editing department was really doubtful while publishing the previous edition. She’s not just wearing the outfit for fashion, she’s a bona fide maid! Phew, that was close. I’m so glad I recognized her before I asked anything stupid. You’re doing good, Lala! Keep it up!

As I was encouraging myself, the very person I was hoping to meet, Kelvin, entered the room.

“Sorry, I’m a bit late. I was exercising just now.”

So this is the man feared by the world as “Grim Reaper”...and “Battle Junkie,” “Philanderer,” and “War Poet,” among all the other titles that need confirming. In person, he looks like a surprisingly sincere person, though. I’m a little relieved. I do need to ask about all those titles today too. Go on, you got this, Lala!

“Say, Kelvin, whose turn is it to sleep with you tonight? Oh, who’s this?”

“Pffft!”

“Sera, this is someone from the Guild! I beg you, please watch what you say in front of her!”

The redhead who had suddenly popped into the room dropped a bombshell. Kelvin and Efil immediately chided her, but there was no more doubt that he was a phil— No, no, it was still too early to make assumptions. *Let’s calm down. Stay cool, Lala.*

“Dearest brother Kelvin, let’s take a bath together!”

“Shutola-chan, you shouldn’t go out wearing only a bath towel!”

“Pffft!”

“Shutola and Rion?! Why’re you two half-naked?!”

Oh, this is not good. This is very bad. Now two young girls who’re pretty much baring everything have come along. Does this mean what I think it means? I’m getting the feeling that they bathe together on a daily basis. Even if they’re siblings, that’s a bit— No, no, I should overlook this with the heart of a saint. I’m sure that I’m just misunderstanding Kelvin-san. I’ve only known him for a few minutes. That’s right, it’s not good to form preconceptions of people, Lala.

The younger girl said, “Since we’re going to take a bath, one towel is enough, right? It was so intense with dearest brother (during the practice match) just now, we should clean ourselves up.”

The somewhat older girl nodded in agreement. “That’s right. (The practice match) today was even more intense than usual, so I’ve worked up a huge sweat. I figured you did too, Kel-nii, so let’s get in together.”

“Pffft!”

“I...I’m very glad for the consideration, but I have this interview to do now. Don’t worry about me; you two go on and take your bath first.”

The two girls went “Okay!” in unison and headed off.

Okay, I’m now a hundred percent sure. There is no more room for doubt. Guildmaster General, do you think I’ll be able to leave this house untainted? That’s my sole worry now.

Gerard Giving It His All

As always, the dark knight, Gerard, woke up early. He got up from his bed, still in his armor, and poured himself a cup of tea from the pot in the room. He slowly enjoyed its taste and the silence while waiting for the sun to rise.

When the cup was empty, he propped his greatsword on his shoulder and headed outside to fulfill his daily quota of practice swings. As it was still early, he kept his movements as silent as possible, but each swing was faster than the eye could follow.

Suddenly, the apprentice maid, Ruka, walked by, yawning and sleepily rubbing her eyes. "Oh, good morning, Grandpa Gerard."

"Ruka! Good morning indeed!" Gerard exclaimed. "Look at this! Isn't it cool?"

"Aha ha, you're supposed to practice seriously!"

Gerard had switched up his swings to ones that focused more on looking impressive, but he normally was quite serious in his training.

"Oh, right, I was on my way to the kitchen. Bye-bye, grandpa!"

"Bye-bye!" Gerard waved his arm in an exaggerated manner. Somehow, his arm waving seemed even sharper than his sword swings just now.

"Mm, that was a very productive training session indeed. Especially the latter half!"

"Waaaaaah!"

Suddenly, a little girl's wail rang out. It was quite soft, indicating that it had come from far away, but Gerard was able to instantly pick up on it, identify its source, and even determine whose voice it was.

"SHUTOLAAAA! WHAT HAPPENED?!"

The knight ran and ran. He took the shortest route to Shutola's bedroom, knocked on her door properly, and entered only when she gave permission. He had considered climbing the wall to the second floor but immediately dismissed the idea. It was his policy to not cause his grandchildren unnecessary alarm.

"Ugh, grandpa...I dreamed that Mdo farak ate the pudding I set aside to eat as a snack later. I was so close to actually eating it!"

"What?! That sounds like a disaster! Now, normally I would scold Mdo for doing something like this, but if it was in a dream, I mean..."

"Don't worry, I understand it with my head, grandpa. Even though Mdo farak loves sweets, she won't actually steal things from people. Rather, I should be the one to reflect on myself for having a dream like this. Ehe heh, I'm sorry for making you worry."

"What a sweet girl you are! Just wait, I'll go ask Efil to make pudding for today's snack right away!"

"Grand— Ah, he's already gone."

With the same speed at which he had arrived at Shutola's room,

Gerard charged down the twists and turns of the house's staircases. When he reached the kitchen, although he got scolded by Efil for running inside the house, he still succeeded in convincing her to make pudding for the day's snack. Mission complete.

"We're hooooome!"

"Awooooo!" (We're back!)

"Oh, Rion and Alex! Were you two out for a morning walk?"

"Yep! We sure w— Uh, why're you sitting in the seiza pose, Gramps? In the hallway, no less."

"The reason is more profound than the height of the mountains and the depth of the seas. It'd take a long time to tell you the full story, so don't worry about it."

"I...see. Well, there are times like that too."

"Arf?" (Are there?)

The reason was actually quite simple and straightforward, but Rion seemed to have caught on and decided to let the matter slide.

Ange-sensei's Survival Seminar

"Outdoors training?"

Shutola, the princess currently freeloading at Kelvin's house, and Kelvin's apprentice maid, Ruka, were playing in the house's front yard when they were suddenly approached by Kelvin and Ange.

"That's right." Kelvin nodded. "You two don't have much experience with the outdoors yet, do you? So I thought this was as good a time as any to familiarize you with it, both mentally and physically. Well, just think of it as a camping trip. Just without any tools."

"Dearest brother, the phrase 'without any tools' sounds very worrying to me..."

"There's nothing to worry about! Why? Because you'll have a special instructor coming along with you: Ange-sensei! I guarantee you she knows more about survival camping than anyone else in this entire world!"

Ruka turned to her friend. "Shutola-sama, what does 'survival camping' mean?"

"At the very least, it's clearly not normal camping." Due to her wealth of knowledge, Shutola's worries had already turned into certainty.

"Hi! As Kelvin said, I'm Ange. You can call me 'sister Ange' and think of me as your big sister. We're gonna have so much fun the next three days!"

"Whaaat? Three whole days? What're we gonna do about the food?"

“Good question, Ruka-chan! You like cooking, right? I can see how you’d be worried about cooking without tools, but I’ll show you how much of a difference knowledge and experience can make. By the way, my best dish is snake! I’ll thoroughly teach you everything from how to catch and dress them to how to cook them in various scenarios!”

“Uh...”

Shutola was now extremely uneasy. Ange looked reliable with her friendly smile and fingers held in the peace sign, but at the same time, it seemed very likely that what she would be teaching would be quite far off the rails.

“I, uh, already have lots of knowledge, so I think I’ll p—”

“Oh, no, hon, just knowing something in your head is very different from *actually* knowing it. They’re very different things. You’re knowledgeable about many things, Shutola-chan, and you’ve got a lot of energy, Ruka-chan, but that alone isn’t enough. You two need to have both, or you aren’t going to survive, given how harsh survival is!”

Shutola fell silent as Ruka went, “Wow, is that true?” without seeming to quite understand what Ange was talking about. By now, the older girl was done trying to hide things. She’d even used the term “harsh” straight out.

“Master, are mommy and Rion-sama not coming with us?”

“Well, Ellie used to have a job that required her to go hunting and Rion does this kind of thing with Alex pretty much every day as a part of their play. So no, they don’t particularly need this.”

“Aw, I thought we could play together.” Ruka hung her head.

Ange smiled. “In exchange, this big sister will teach you everything you need to know. All right, you two. First thing you have to do is to get changed. I imagine it’d be hard to get dirt out of that maid uniform and fancy dress.” She handed over sets of carefully folded camouflage uniforms, then plopped a sheathed knife on top as if it was the most natural thing to do.

“I...am going to get dirtied, I see...”

“Oh, yep! You’re gonna get very dirty.”

“I don’t even...”

“Oh, goody! We get to play in the mud!”

And so Kelvin watched Ange set out with the two young girls on her shoulders, praying that they would come back more stouthearted three days later.

Alex’s Rebellious Phase

Recently, Rion had realized that Alex was acting strange. During

mealtimes, he would normally get seconds, then finish with an extra bone as a snack. For the past few days, however, he did not have seconds and left his bone untouched. There were red flags besides food too. For example, his fur had become so fluffy and glossy that he hardly needed the daily brushing Rion gave him anymore.

“Alex, wanna go for a walk? Huh? Where’s... That’s strange. I can’t find him anywhere.”

Also, he would sometimes disappear somewhere without telling Rion in advance. It would be fastest to reach out through telepathy, but Rion’s mind was occupied by a single alarming thought.

“Don’t tell me he’s entered his rebellious phase?!”

It was a pretty huge leap in logic, to be honest.

“Is this his way of showing his resolve to leave my care and make his own way in the world? Hmm...as his partner, I have a duty to see for myself!”

And so Rion decided to shadow the shadow wolf. She would use every means at her disposal to follow him without alerting him. And she didn’t have to wait long; opportunity came the next morning.

“Arf! Arf! Arf!” (Hmm, hmm, hmm...!)

Why’s he in such high spirits?!

Alex was almost skipping as he left the house and headed out, humming along the way.

Is he enjoying having become a lone wolf? No, no, it’s too early to jump to conclusions. For now, let’s continue shadowing him. Sneaky sneak, sneaky sneak.

Despite her usage of “sneaky sneak,” the speed at which Rion was moving would be more accurately described as “fwoom, fwoom.” She was basically streaking by as fast as a gust of wind.

“Awooo!” (Arrived!)

Huh? This place is...

Upon following Alex, Rion found herself in front of a place serving as a resting spot for people: a park. The wolf walked right in without any hesitation whatsoever.

“Oh, hon, look. Alex-chan’s come again.”

“Every time I see him, I’m blown away by how huge he is! He sure is worth brushing!”

“Yay, Alex is here! Lemme ride your back again today!”

“Oh my, what a big doggie. I made this snack for my child, but would you like some too?”

The moment Alex stepped into the park, everyone inside, regardless of age and gender, crowded around him. Whereas some asked to brush him, some begged him to play with them, and some even began feeding him snacks. Despite his large bulk and fierce wolf-like appearance, no one looked scared of him in the slightest. At this

moment, Alex was undoubtedly the center of attention in this park.

“Awoooo!” (I’m shining right now!)

“What was that about shining?”

“Arf?!” (What?!)

Rion’s sudden appearance almost made Alex jump out of his skin. He desperately tried to justify himself, explaining that he had happened on this park during one of his walks and ended up garnering quite a bit of popularity. Consequently, he had been slipping away to enjoy some time here every once in a while. In short, this was sort of his secret base.

A strange mixture of emotions washed over Rion: half relief that Alex had not actually entered a rebellious phase, and half wryness at the childish side that still remained in him. Afterwards, she gave her thanks to everyone who had given Alex snacks and brushed him. By the end of the day, she had fully become a part of the group at the park and was playing just as hard as everyone else.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Chapter 1: Apostles

Chapter 2: The Holy Empire of Deramis

Chapter 3: The Heroes Return

Chapter 4: The Catacombs of Heroic Spirits

Side Story: The Saint's Elegant Day Off

Afterword

Character Stats

Bonus Short Stories

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by Doufu Mayoi

Translated by Taishi

Edited by Tess Nanavati

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